

May 2022

RV PRO

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Women in Charge

The RV Women's Alliance is stepping up its efforts to empower women (and men) in their professional careers.

SPECIAL WOMEN IN BUSINESS COVERAGE:

- Women Leading the Way Profiles
- Woman-Led KING is King of the Airwaves
- West Va. Couple Are Mountain Movers

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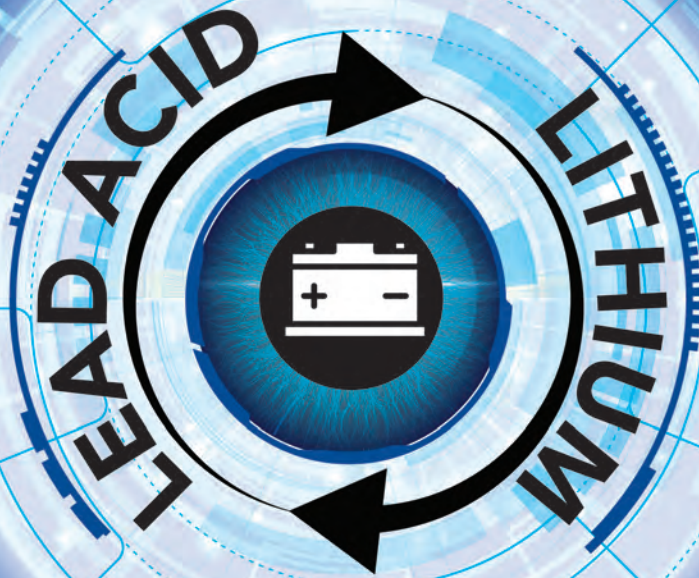
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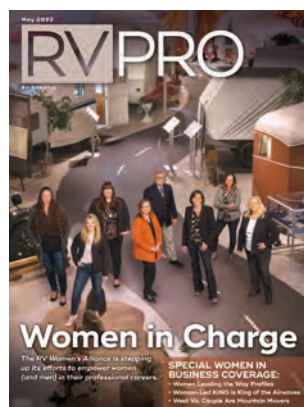
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ABOUT THE COVER:

This month's cover features members of the RV Women's Alliance, which is looking to expand on its recent successes with even more educational events and offerings for members. (Photo by Steve Toepp with Midwest Photographics)

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A Force to Be Reckoned With



Jordan Benschop
MANAGING
EDITOR

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Leadership is a mindset – not a position. And when it comes to recognizing great leaders, there's no shortage in the RV industry. Especially in May, when *RV PRO* turns the spotlight on remarkable women tackling a market that's demanding diverse ideas, product innovation and creative solutions more than ever before.

As a young “woman in business” myself, I was moved and encouraged by the stories in this year's Women Leading the Way – our annual feature highlighting 10 industry pros who exemplify good leadership and are helping drive their organizations to new heights.

Take the story of **Michilah Grimes**, director of corporate and community impact for Lippert, whose nonprofit work has helped generate more than 550,000 hours of community service on a global scale. Or **Selma Salihagic**, general manager of Airxcel's Aqua-Hot brand – once a Bosnian refugee with \$50 in her pocket who later handled an aerospace manufacturer's contracts with the U.S. Department of Defense. Or **Janine Pettit**, founder and editor-in-chief of *Girl Camper* and *Girl Camper Magazine*, whose once small blog garnered a Go RVing partnership and a new magazine with a national honorable mention award for design.

That's just a peek at this month's issue, which defines success in many ways. Also inside of our special section celebrating women in business, read about several accomplished husband-and-wife duos, plus a Q&A covering the plans of the RV Women's Alliance.

The long-standing notion of the RV industry being mostly men isn't stopping the growing presence and influence of women. A recent RVWA survey found a 16-plus percent increase in overall representation of industry women since 2019. While that number may be small, it's a step forward – not only for us ladies, but for the entire industry and its evolution.

A Change in the Winds

The *RV PRO* team is shifting just in time for the annual Women in Business issue. **Rebecca Tittel**, who joined the publication in May 2021 as sales coordinator, was promoted recently to media consultant for the eastern United States.

“I have loved working with everyone in an ad support role, and I am so excited to be able to work with you in this new capacity,” Tittel said.

Taking over Tittel's former role is **Brooke Anderson**, a born-and-raised Texan and graduate of Oklahoma State University, who recently moved to Colorado.

“I'm thrilled that my new position with *RV PRO* will allow me the unique privilege to leverage my array of experience and skills into one role, and look forward to diving headfirst into this new opportunity for growth and experience,” Anderson said.

RV PRO is delighted to have Tittel and Anderson move forward in their new capacities. Both positions are crucial to our publication's success.

As always, thanks for reading – and cheers, ladies!

RV PRO

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Women Leading the Way

**By Darian Armer,
Lisa Dicksteen,
Holli Koster,
Stephanie Patrick
and Jordan Benshop**

Now in its seventh year, *RV PRO* magazine is again recognizing standout women in the RV industry in its annual Women in Business special section, including this Women Leading the Way feature article.

This year's 10 noteworthy female professionals are notable for their accomplishments and leadership in areas including diversity, product design, profitability, marketing innovation, community outreach and much more. As in past years, this year's honorees come from a variety of industry segments, including OEMs, suppliers, distributors, dealerships and independent businesses.

While the women profiled in this section have unique backgrounds and came to the industry via different paths, they are united in their belief that the industry offers invaluable experiences and opportunities for both women and men who are willing to work hard, seek out talented mentors, and embrace challenges.

So, join *RV PRO* in celebrating the notable accomplishments of these women. *RV PRO* sincerely thanks all of our honorees for sharing their stories. Additionally, tremendous thanks go to this year's sponsors: Century Chemical, Cummins Power Generation, Graphix Unlimited, Keystone RV, NTP-STAG, Northpoint Commercial Finance, Patrick Industries, RV Women's Alliance, THOR Industries and United States Warranty Corporation.

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RENEE JONES
Head of Marketing,
THOR Industries



SELMA SALHAGIC
GM of Aqua-Hot,
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Renee Jones

Head of Marketing
THOR Industries

At the height of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, THOR Industries research found that people of color often did not feel comfortable camping and RVing.

“The feedback,” says THOR Head of Marketing Renee Jones, “is that people of color don’t feel safe – not because of a bear or a snake, but, often, because of white people. That really hit home for our leadership team, and it became very important to us that everyone have the same opportunity to be outdoors and enjoy nature and its healing effects.”

As a result, Jones and her team – which operate in support of THOR’s family of companies – are forging national partnerships and transforming the company’s marketing with a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion.

One major program Jones helped lead is the creation of the Together Outdoors Coalition. Founded and funded by THOR Industries, the coalition is operated and led by Outdoor Recreation Roundtable (ORR) with representation across the recreation spectrum. Through ORR, the coalition works closely with state and national legislators and the U.S. Department of the Interior to make the outdoors a more inviting place for marginalized populations.

In the inclusion space, THOR also is partnered with Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. for its Girl Scouts Love State Parks program and also with First Descents, an organization that provides outdoor adventures for young adults affected by cancer and other serious health conditions.

While Jones is enthusiastic about efforts to transform the industry and make the outdoors more welcoming to all, she is also proud of the work her team has been doing internally to make sure marketing efforts on behalf of THOR’s family of companies are inclusive.

Coming to the RV industry following a career predominantly focused on consumer packaged goods, Jones led a marketing agency with Jayco as a client. Originally from Elkhart, Ind., she returned to the area 10 years ago, transitioning in 2017 to lead corporate marketing for Jayco and rising to become head of marketing for THOR Industries just two years later.

“Just a few years ago at the corporate level, we really didn’t have a marketing team,” says Jones. “Being able to build the team and help provide our

family of companies with data and consumer insights they could use to be successful and improve the consumer experience has been extremely rewarding.”

Jones says she is grateful not only to her team, but for the relationships she’s developed with the marketing teams at each of THOR’s companies around the globe – and the partnership that has developed as a result.

A recent high point for Jones was leading the public relations and communication efforts around THOR’s January launch of the company’s first electric RVs, during the 2022 Florida RV SuperShow.

Reflecting on her successful career in the RV industry, Jones says her work with cross-functional teams has been the most vital to her growth. She says, “My biggest advice to people coming into the industry is to get in as many cross-functional experiences as you can so that you can truly learn the business and understand your organization comprehensively.”



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Michilah Grimes

Director of Corporate and Community Impact
Lippert

One thing was made clear about Michilah Grimes' work – at the end of the day, it's much larger than Lippert.

Joining the large and thriving company at the start of a cultural shift in leadership isn't an ordinary task. After running nonprofit events and starting a family, Grimes joined Lippert part-time. She blossomed in her first year, garnering the support of President and CEO Jason Lippert to head the company's community outreach efforts – a nonexistent role at the time.

"It's not just about the donation side of things," she says of her position. "It's about volunteering and being that force for good, having a positive impact in our communities and inspiring others to get involved."

Grimes meets with several nonprofits each week, based on employee suggestions and involvement. Her team of four works directly with HR members across Lippert's 90-plus facilities to lead volunteer initiatives at its individual plants and across the corporation.

Finding innovative ways for people to give back – which often goes beyond writing a check – is an underlying theme throughout Grimes' career. Not everyone has the means to attend a nonprofit event or give at an auction, she says – a notion that shifted Lippert's dynamics.

"How do we make (giving back) a level playing field?" Grimes says of the company's outreach planning. "How do we have more impact? And what can set us apart?"

The first answer was creating Lippert's "100,000 Hour Volunteer Initiative" in 2017 – a community service effort that has since garnered more than 550,000 hours of volunteer work by Lippert team members across the globe. The move sparked a shift in company culture and spawned initiatives in many areas of need, including a recently launched grant program offering \$500,000 to nonprofits dealing with kids' mental health following the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It's truly not about Lippert," Grimes says. "It has to do with the change that is being made, and people finding purpose and getting involved who would've never gotten involved if we didn't start this initiative. It's so powerful."

The organization's volunteer efforts have caught the eye of campgrounds seeking innovative family



activities, along with RVers themselves pursuing purpose in their travels – areas that Grimes says she is currently focused on. As a member of the Emerging Leaders Coalition, she recently proposed a first-ever volunteer initiative for the entire RV industry.

"I think this industry is truly special," she says. "I feel there's no other industry that really wraps their arms around giving – whether its financially, or their time and talents – like this industry does."

Grimes credits Jason Lippert with helping her to build essential relationships within the RV world.

"He (Jason) has always let me kind of run with what I think is going to work best, but also helped me understand the industry and really connected me with the right people to be successful in this," she says.

Outside of her own accomplishments, Grimes says she holds something dearer.

"I am most proud of our team members who have bought into this and the change they are making – it's not even about the hours," she says. "I could say, 'Hey, this nonprofit really needs us.' No questions, our team rallies and gets people out there to help."

"It has been extremely humbling and I'm just thankful I've had this opportunity."



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All of the women featured above are an integral part of bringing the Cummins product to the RV industry.

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Kathy Adams

Chief Commercial Officer
ATC Trailers

Kathy Adams got her start in the RV industry by putting her degree in mechanical engineering to good use as a design engineer with Reese Products.

She created hitches for RVs to make them more functional for the customer. When an RV goes down the road carrying things like bikes, the mechanism that makes that possible is what Adams spent time designing.

"My passion has been creating things that delight customers and end users in a way that makes their life more fun," Adams says. "Why not be in the RV industry and get to create all these cool things people get to go use in their free time and enjoy?"

It was during her time with Reese that Adams earned her MBA. Adams stayed with Reese for 10 years before taking an opportunity with Whirlpool, where she worked for another 10 years.

"Reese was instrumental in helping build me, then Whirlpool was instrumental in taking me to that next level, dealing with multiple product lines and levels of distribution," she says.

Adams credits Rick McCoy with hiring her to work at Reese and spending time mentoring and shaping her into the executive she is today.

"He gave me confidence and the opportunity to think about the business. He drove me to go from a design engineer into really looking at the business differently and going back to get my MBA," she says. "He encouraged me to grow beyond where I was at the time. What I really appreciated about him is that he immediately noticed there was more to me than meets the eye and really fostered my capacity to grow."

After 10 years with Whirlpool, Adams decided to return to the RV industry. She worked elsewhere before her current role as chief commercial officer (CCO) at ATC, which makes RVs and trailers to haul any cargo, including toys and vehicles, with optional living space.

"I enjoyed my time with appliances (at Whirlpool) but coming back to the RV industry felt right to me. It felt like coming home," Adams says. "I'm so energized about the products and possibilities. There are so many toys utilized out there, and how do you get them out there? Motorcycles, ATVs – how do we get those around?"

Adams has another mentor in her new role, ATC CEO Robert Paden.

"He's been instrumental in showing me innovative ways to grow businesses differently. He has really utilized me as I am and what I can bring to the table. I have so much respect for that. He's really teaching me."

Meanwhile, Adams has a wealth of experience she is happy to pass along to those just starting their careers in the RV industry.

"Be strong. Allow your voice to be heard. Don't be intimidated by some of the folks that have been in the industry for years," she says. "There's lots of opportunity here. We really want that fresh look and voice to help drive us forward. That will always be needed in the industry."

In her job, Adams says she starts each day by walking the manufacturing floor so she can see and feel the product and interact with employees. She says it sets her up for the day so she can sit down and strategize where to take the business and what gaps there are.

As for the future, Adams says she has no plans to slow down.

"I'm never going to retire. I'm having way too much fun," she says. "I would consider myself a driver of change – and as long as I have the ability to grow and change and bring more things that meet consumer demand and meet customer needs – I'm all in."



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CAMPING WORLD



Stacey Miller

Brand and Communications Manager
Dexter Axle

As brand and communications manager for Dexter Axle, Stacey Miller goes to a lot of meetings.

“My family says, ‘you can’t possibly need to have all those meetings’ – but I do,” she says. “They are with different people in different departments about different things: marketing, branding, product development and innovation. We do brainstorming, have conversations, think through issues – all the creative aspects of our business.”

Most of these are things that draw on her bachelor’s degree in graphic design and her years of experience in marketing and branding, much of it in the RV industry and all of it in Indiana.

“It’s a small world; a small town,” she says. “I grew up here, my family is here, so it was a natural progression to want to work here.”

“Here” encompasses the community, the industry, and the company.

“We are very diverse in the channels we serve and it’s rewarding to know we can have an impact on an industry that’s really geared toward fun and end-users just trying to enjoy their time,” she says. “It’s also relaxed, especially as compared to other industries like auto and food, which are much more constrained.”

Such an “ever-changing” industry allows different people to shine in different areas. While there is no one individual Miller considers a mentor, she has not been without guidance.

“Fortunately, I have worked with a lot of really great co-workers, bosses, etc. All those folks that saw potential and supported my career development by placing me in situations where I could expand my skill set,” she says. “I have also had some really exceptional influences in my personal life, especially my grandparents and my parents, just the kind of people they were. They taught me to work hard, give back, be kind. I know it’s a cliché, but working hard and showing up are crucial.”

This is advice she shares with those she works with, no matter their gender. However, naturally, the fact that she is a woman in a male-dominated industry has not escaped her notice.

“I try not to think about it; I try not to make that be a meaningful component,” she says. “I try to just be myself – a very driven individual with my own unique skill set. It’s really an open book as to what you can do; how you can influence things.”



“You shouldn’t have to shift your person to meet somebody’s expectations,” she adds. “As women, we need to support each other, empower each other, be there for each other. It’s important that we not be intimidated by other women reaching positions of power. Instead, we should be impressed.”

“We’ve all, as women in an industry that’s male-heavy, had experiences where someone might assume we don’t have the skill set or the knowledge. I just brush that off. That’s on them,” Miller says. “What’s interesting is that there are more instances where you’re working the booth at a trade show, and someone comes up and asks a really detailed complex question and I say, ‘Wow! I’m really glad you think I have the knowledge to answer that,’ before connecting them with someone with the appropriate knowledge.”

Gaining the knowledge to influence things is important to her, and Miller says she is particularly proud of the fact that in 2021 she completed the Kellogg Executive Scholars program at Northwestern University.



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Selma Salihagic

General Manager
Aqua-Hot

The image of the refugee coming to America with \$50 and a dream may seem like a cliché – unless it's your story.

In 1997, toward the end of the war in Bosnia, Sarajevo native Selma Salihagic, her husband and their 2-year-old daughter arrived in the U.S. with two duffle bags and \$50. Her husband did not speak any English and she only knew what she'd learned in school. She laughs at the memory of thinking that much English was going to be enough.

"But," she says now, "we worked hard, believed in ourselves, had guts. It all prepared me to take on this challenge and keep growing this company."

Salihagic's first job in the RV industry was as a manufacturing manager with Carefree of Colorado. Then, she went back to school. Building on her BS in mechanical engineering, she earned her master's degree in the same arena. Armed with that, she joined Ball Aerospace, where she was a senior engineering manager, handling the company's contracts with the U.S. Department of Defense.

She laughs when people ask how she feels about working in the "male-dominated" RV industry, saying, "After the DoD?" There, she says she was "always being told, 'You have to change. You have to think and behave like a man.' I hated that. Why not accept me as I am? I am authentic and I am definitely good at what I do."

In contrast, "In the RV industry, not one person gave that advice. They treated me as what I am – a professional businesswoman and successful leader," she says.

"It doesn't matter whether you're male or female. There are so many opportunities in this industry. Look around, find them, keep pushing and keep going. Take every opportunity that comes your way and then take your people with you on the journey," say Salihagic, a Lean Six Sigma Black Belt who was named general manager of Aqua-Hot in September 2019.

Her 2019 job interview at Airxcel, which owns Aqua-Hot, "was really tough," but is the way she interviews potential new hires today. She laughs again as she recounts being shown the org chart during that interview and seeing the name of Jeff Rutherford, Airxcel's CEO and formerly the president of Carefree of Colorado from her time with the company. He

was a mentor to her there and remains one today.

"He's only a phone call away," she says. "He equips me with advice or a different perspective. And some discussions are tough. But I always leave feeling stronger."

Her voice softens as she mentions her other mentor, industry veteran Kevin Phillips.

"He was always there for me," she says. "He was more than a mentor; he was my rock, and since he passed, I miss him so much."

Now, being able to offer opportunities and assistance to others on her team is one of her main joys, according to Salihagic.

"Today, I have the power to change somebody's life – just like somebody in the past helped me to change my life. Now, I can send that elevator back," she says. "That's where I am spending the majority of my time."

Salihagic's day "starts with numbers – parts, shipping, profit." But it "ends in the shipping department. I like to see all that Aqua-Hot product packed and ready to go – to know that my product is going to travel with people and help them make memories with the people they love."





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Laura Dobbs

Director of Service and Customer Experience
General RV Center

Laura Dobbs spent 10 years in the pharmaceutical industry honing her skills in regulatory compliance and customer care before joining General RV as the director of customer experience in 2017.

While Dobbs didn't have a ton of experience with the RV world, she knows customer service like the back of her hand.

"When the opportunity became available at General RV, I thought it would be a good experience to see what I could do," she says. "We had an RV when I was an older kid and we did a few camping trips, but I wasn't really a big RV camper. It was a whole learning experience for me. I didn't know the ins and outs and brands coming into this. I had to learn it."

The first four weeks on the job, Dobbs was in the dealership sitting on the front line with service managers so she could learn the entire flow, customer expectations during the purchase, service and overall experience. She spent the rest of her first year in the customer experience department talking to customers about what they needed. Her role mainly involved handling legal issues and complaints.

"It was the best education I could get to see what our teams do every day. I spent time understanding where we had opportunities in the dealership, the different brands, and what expectations were," she says. "Working with customers through the customer experience director role really got me to understand those expectations and see where we could meet them."

Dobbs says she learned about the industry from her peers and during visits to OEM plants.

"Seeing what an actual RV manufacturer looks like was eye-opening. If you don't grow up in the industry, you come in thinking it looks like automobile manufacturing," she says. "I came in as a sponge and soaked it all up."

In 2018, Dobbs took over management of the service department, merging the customer experience department with the service department, which is how she got her current title as the service and customer experience director at General RV.

She spends her days looking at the profitability of service, making sure the service department is profitable every single day and that the team is the most efficient it can be, all while creating the premier RV experience for customers on the ownership side.



"Everything we do is centered around being the premier RV partner for customers and manufacturers," says Dobbs. "The whole reason customers purchase an RV for the most part is to create lifelong family memories. That's what camping is all about. As long as we continue to focus on the fact that customers typically buy an RV for fun and relaxation, we should make the rest of their experience that way as well. Buying needs to be filled with fun and enjoyment."

Dobbs advice to those just starting their careers in the RV industry builds on that customer service ideal.

"My advice to those coming into this line of work is to really have that goal of customer service in everything we do. An RV is definitely something people want – they don't need one," says Dobbs. "It's important to continue to make every interaction with customers with that in mind."



Celebrating Women in the RV Industry: Collaborating and Growing Together



"Having worked in this industry for over 20 years, I have seen the positive impact women have had, and the respect they have earned along the way. As our relationships deepen, and our successes build, we continue to support and promote each other on our professional journey."

- Stacey Pletcher, Senior Designer

Please join our team at The Studio as we celebrate women in the RV industry! Their positive impact and many contributions are seen throughout every segment of this rapidly growing business.

Historically, the RV industry has been predominantly male, but over the past few years the female representation has climbed significantly. Within the last two years alone, there has been an estimated 16% increase* in women applicants, and more companies are actively seeking female employees.

The Patrick Industries Design Center and Showroom has an inspiring group of women who all bring unique skillsets to our multitalented team. Collaboration and connection are meaningful parts of our day to day, and we are proud to be amongst the wonderfully talented women who make this growth possible.



"I have loved building relationships with so many creative minds within the industry. Working with intelligent and imaginative females has helped me grow as a Designer and individual."

- Corey Payne, Senior Designer



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*Statistic Source: Article. RVWA: Women's Representation in RV Industry is Improving



Julie Cox

General Manager
Campers Inn RV of Acworth, Ga.

Julie Cox loves numbers: how they organize things, how they keep track of things, how they work together to let you know how you're doing. But in 1996, the now-general manager of Campers Inn RV in Acworth, Ga., left banking after finding a new love.

It started when she took a job as a bookkeeper at Camping Time.

"I knew right away this (the RV industry) was the industry I'd be in for the rest of my life," she says.

Cox quickly ran through the dealership's different jobs. When she got to sales, she decided to stay a while.



"I loved the training aspect and growing a strong, dynamic sales team. The most rewarding thing is bringing people up and witnessing their success," she says.

She kept moving up the ranks, and when Camping World bought Camping Time, she was assistant regional vice president.

"I loved the thrill of opening new locations," she says. However, soon she wanted to return to being a more hands-on mentor, so she says she "looked for another start from the ground up location where I could spend time growing people and watching them succeed."

That's when she found her true love: "I feel in my heart Campers Inn RV will certainly be where I call home until I retire," she says.

One of the reasons Cox says she loves being a mentor is that she's had such great ones herself. Camping Time owners Martin Zonnenberg and Mark Derrick, "taught me so much about the industry and always opened up the books and their minds and let me soak it all up. I am grateful to this very day to both of these gentlemen."

Then there was Josh Erickson at Camping World, who watched her advance into more powerful positions.

That love of mentoring "serendipitously came full circle" when a young man she'd hired as a salesman, trained, and then lost track of came back into her life by hiring her.

"I could not be more proud of Joel (Cline) and his accomplishments or more pleased to work for him," she says.

Cox also enjoys her daily non-routine.

"I'm always busy, busy, busy, coaching, solving problems, rounding the dealership departments, emails, calls, managing inventory, interviewing potential new hires, budgeting, tracking our month's success, diving into expenses, identifying any issues. When you enjoy what you do, it never feels like work."

And she doesn't miss her old industry at all. She says the RV industry is "less stuffy" and more accepting of women in positions of power.

"When I left banking, there were more women than there were in the RV industry when I started, but none in management. When I left Camping World, it had 125 stores and I was one of only two or three female GMs. When I started at Campers Inn, I was one of three females out of about 26 people. Now, my store of 54 has 10, including a rock star technician," she says.

More women enter the industry every day. Cox's advice to them is the same as her advice to that young man she mentored back at Camping World, "Work hard, question everything, be yourself, be fair with everyone and do right by your employees and customers and you'll always win."

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Lori Keller Morrow

Director of Marketing
Keller Marine & RV

With family ties to outdoor industries going back as far back as the 1950s, Lori Keller Morrow of Keller Marine & RV has few memories that don't involve RVs in some way.

"I can even remember helping my mom decorate campers (when I was) a little girl for our wholesale shows in those early days," she says.

Today, Morrow and her brother, Michael Keller, are second-generation owners of the Port Trevorton, Pa.-based wholesale distributor Keller Marine & RV, primarily serving dealers in the Northeast and Southeast.

Morrow says the duo works well because each one has different strengths. She was a co-op advertising coordinator for three years before rejoining the family business in 1985 as the marine buyer, while her brother loves technology and traveling to visit customers. Together, they created KWEB, the business-to-business ordering system that allows dealers to look up and order parts and accessories from Keller. Sister and brother also established a business-to-consumer system that ships products from Keller's warehouse with the dealers' labels; Morrow considers it each dealer's own little business, and it allows for more marketing opportunities.

"It allows them to have to have all the inventory we have at their fingertips," she says.

While serving marine dealers remains important to Keller, the RV business accounts for more sales.

And while the distributor likes to be on the forefront of technology, Morrow says she doesn't forget that customer service often requires more than that.

"You need the technology to be efficient, but I believe you always need to be just one phone call away from a person if they need you," she says.

Morrow has led Keller's marketing department since 2008, but she laughs when asked about her "typical" day – because she says there isn't one. Her job description includes planning and designing Keller's annual show and overseeing the company's popular catalogs, but she can take on other roles if her brother isn't available.

"The main thing I think is: How can I help that dealer make sure that person stays in the RV business and comes back and is happy," she says.

Morrow considers her father to be one of her mentors because he weathered many business set-

backs over the years, yet he did so without losing faith or his composure. Following his example, she and her brother persevered despite a fire that destroyed the company warehouse in 2013 and COVID woes in recent years.

Today, the distributorship has 70 employees, mostly in Pennsylvania. Many of them have been with the company more than 20 years and some worked for her father.

"I love my job," Morrow says. "I love what I do. It is never boring. Every day is another challenge."

Morrow says Cathy Sutton at Tom Manning and Associates is another mentor. She says Sutton's best advice was: Work hard and don't worry about your accomplishments – just do your job.

"If you do a good job, people are going to notice you," she says.

Morrow's advice for women and men entering the RV industry is to network with people in all areas of the industry.

"The more that you can do that, the more that you can learn and the more we can all work together and keep people RVing," she says.



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Janine Pettit

Founder and Editor-in-Chief
Girl Camper/ *Girl Camper Magazine*

Growing up in a large family of campers, Janine Pettit was thrilled when camping groups began popping up across the country. She bought herself a 10-foot camper and a tow vehicle and began camping on the weekends.

"I saw people doing all kinds of things that weren't safe – not having chains, not doing safety checks," she says. The year was 2015, and *Girl Camper* – then a small blog focused on camper safety – was born.

In the years that have followed, *Girl Camper* has grown in leaps and bounds. Soon after Pettit launched her blog, Go RVing tapped her for a partnership, and she launched a podcast – which now has more than 200 episodes.

The brand also features *Girl Camper Guides*, an educational effort led by local and regional micro-influencers who host events, meeting with and teaching women and working closely with RV dealers in their regions. And, at the height of COVID, Pettit launched *Girl Camper Magazine*, a quarterly publication that now boasts more than eight issues.

The magazine earned an Honorable Mention from the Folio: Eddie and Ozzie Awards, an awards program in the publishing community, under the "New Magazine – Design Category." As the *Girl Camper* team attended the New York ceremony, they enjoyed being in the company of HGTV stars like Joanna Gaines and The Property Brothers.

A stay-at-home mother before she launched *Girl Camper*, Pettit describes the growth of her brand as a natural evolution that began when her youngest child was about to graduate from high school.

"At the time, I was talking to my oldest daughter, telling her that I would like to work for 10 years to contribute to the coffers before her dad and I retired," Pettit says. "She told me, 'Mom, you have so many skills, forming groups and putting people together. You are great at making things happen.'"

Pettit's daughter, who works in marketing, wrote her mother a life skills resume – a gesture Pettit says not only moved her to tears but helped her recognize many of the skills she already possessed.

"I realized that I can do all of these things," she says. "I was always a hustler. I've always been a busy person."

Today, Pettit credits her daughter and her husband, whom she describes as an incredible cheerleader, with



helping her get *Girl Camper* off the ground. Her daughter even helped her develop the tagline for *Girl Camper*: "Going Places. Doing Things."

She says she also has received "incredible encouragement" from Karen Redfern of Go RVing, as well as Christy Spencer of Keystone RV, both of whom she says understood that *Girl Camper* approaches the encouragement of the RV lifestyle from an experiential standpoint.

Girl Camper is now a full-time job for Pettit, who works 50 to 60 hours a week, including two to three days per week with the magazine – the accomplishment of which she is proudest.

"We just really want to encourage people by showing them what we do and giving them the confidence to do it themselves," says Pettit. "When you get outdoors, it's soothing to your soul. There is no wrong way to camp like a girl."



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Sarah Raymond

Vice President of Design
Patrick Industries

Even though she grew up near Elkhart, Ind., Sarah Raymond did not know much about the RV industry in her younger years.

"I didn't have any family in the industry and I was kind of unaware of all that was happening around me," she says.

Her appetite for a warmer climate and life experience took her first to Atlanta, where she launched a successful business at the height of the housing boom. Then, feeling like she wasn't quite ready to settle down, she moved sight unseen to Costa Rica to open and run a café and art shop for two years.

It was when she returned to the Midwest in 2003 for family-related reasons that she joined the RV industry, becoming director of design/marketing for Adorn, a company that would later be acquired

by Patrick Industries. Working today as the supplier's vice president of design, Raymond enjoys her hectic schedule and the fact that no two days are ever the same.

At Patrick, Raymond leads a team of interior designers, a web developer, a sample department, graphic artists, and a design engineer who produces CAD and 3D-printed items, plus a craftsman who builds the department's displays. Housed at Patrick Industries' sprawling stand-alone design center and showroom, her team is constantly bringing new products online and developing creative new displays to showcase the company's products.

The opening of the design center and showroom itself has been a crowning achievement for Raymond during her career with Patrick Industries.





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"Patrick Industries has such a great culture. Everyone works together and we all build each other up."

– Sarah Raymond, Patrick Industries vice president of design

Before opening the 45,000-square-foot space, Raymond's team operated from a 2,500-square-foot showroom in the middle of Patrick's sales office. The team could only showcase products from six or seven of the firm's more than 20 business units at one time.

Transitioning to the new space in 2016 was a grueling six-month project for Raymond and her team, as they transformed an empty warehouse. But the space has since become an important asset – a one-stop shop for OEMs, which previously spent full days visiting multiple Patrick showrooms spread across Elkhart.

"Now we can put things together and make some decisions ahead of time," she says. "It has opened a ton of opportunities for us, especially just in terms of customer satisfaction."

Reflecting on her career with Patrick, Raymond says she feels extremely thankful and grateful to work for a company that supports women in the industry, with women represented across all levels of leadership.

"Patrick has such a great culture," she says. "Everyone works together, and we all build each other up."

Raymond says she's also thankful for her boss, President Jeff Rodino, who has both mentored her and been supportive of her team.

She credits her success in large part to working hard, being open to learning and never saying no to opportunities – regardless of how big or scary those opportunities may have looked at the time.

In her spare time, stress relief is also important for Raymond, who taps even more into her creative side as a lead vocalist for two bands. Her involvement in High Gravity and Acoustic Gravity has also helped her develop professional relationships, as her bands perform in Elkhart and sometimes at OEM events.

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Mountain Movers

By Darian Armer

Despite a lack of prior experience, husband-and-wife team Joe and Gina Starett have built Mountaineer RV & Outdoor Center into a power player in the West Virginia RV dealer market.

Gina and Joe Starett aren't typical RV dealership owners.

They don't come from a background of RVing, or a legacy of generational dealership ownership, but they know customer service and it shows in all aspects of their dealership. From service to sales – even the products they carry and how they're displayed – all are designed with the customer in mind.

The couple previously operated an oil and gas business, which they sold in 2015, and Joe Starett fully stepped away from the business in 2016.

"At that time, we thought, 'Hey, we'll just cruise.' We always had campers. I camped all my life," Joe Starett says.

It was then the couple decided to purchase a new RV for their future adventures.

"We went looking for a camper. We went to the obvious places around here and even out of state," Joe Starett says. "We had a little time on our hands, so we went to Ohio and Pennsylvania.

"We had bought campers at places, but I just didn't have that right feeling. I didn't find the dealership or salesperson I was comfortable with," he says. "Going down the road, I looked at my wife and said, 'I'm going to start my own dealership.' She said, 'Are you serious?' I said, 'Yeah. How hard can it be?'"

Both Joe and Gina Starett laugh at this part, reflecting on how much work running their dealership has actually been.

"He's a risk taker. He knows no fear. He goes and does it and I make it happen in the background," Gina Starett laughs.

Joe Starett started talking to representatives for various RV manufacturers in the summer of 2017. By spring 2018, the couple had a location. They leased an old office building, doing some work to create a store, a service bay and more.

June 20, 2018, was the dealership's first official day of business. The location had one service bay and reached a maximum of 77 units on the lot at once.

"We very quickly outgrew that location," Joe Starett says.

The couple shut that location down and moved to their current location at Inter-



Joe and Gina Starett are pictured with their children, Hunter and Emma, in their family-owned and operated store, Mountaineer RV and Outdoor Center, in Jane Lew, West Virginia. It was their own unsuccessful search for a family RV that resulted in the Starett's bold decision to open their own dealership.



The Starett's are strong believers in customer service, which they promote as part of the "Mountaineer Difference." "We are dedicated to creating an atmosphere that makes everyone feel welcome. We go above and beyond to meet our customer's needs," says Joe Starett.

PHOTOS BY B&B PHOTOGRAPHY



state 79 and Jane Lew, where they have greatly expanded. They purchased 13 acres and built nine service bays, two body shops, an outside detail bay that can house two units at a time, plus a 15,000-square-foot parts and RV showroom in the new dealership building. The new location opened Sept. 27, 2021.

"We have seen a far higher percentage of growth than we anticipated, even with the interstate location. I'm an accountant, so I conservatively estimate expenses higher and underestimate income," Gina Starett says. "Beginning in February, we saw crowd levels we never expected."

The couple have seen such an increase that there are plans to expand the parking lot and possibly build a service lot to accommodate customers. Accommodating customers is always at the forefront of the Starett's business approach.

Keeping It Customer-Centric

As customers who spent time in dealerships themselves, Joe and Gina created "The Mountaineer RV Difference," which is a



Part of the "Mountaineer Difference" is making sure that every customer is immediately welcomed upon entering the store, as demonstrated here by parts sales rep Matt McKee (left). The dealership's customer-centric statement is posted at every workstation and is part of the onboarding process.



Team members are pictured in front of the dealership. Pictured from left to right are owners Joe and Gina Starett, Parts Manager Chuck Lowther, Service Manager Mike Senic, receptionist Linda Bush, accountant Erica Stalnaker, Finance Manager Tori Zielinski and Sales Manager Mickey Metz.



Mountaineer RV stocks a large selection of RV parts and accessories in its showroom, including rugs, camping pet supplies, kitchen items and marine parts. The dealership also has two waiting areas completely filled with RV furniture, an RV entertainment center, an RV fireplace and DISH TV network that Gina Starett says is a big draw for the dealership.

statement for how each customer should be treated when they come through the doors.

"The second you step into Mountaineer RV & Outdoor Center, you immediately become part of our family," Joe Starett says. "We are dedicated to creating an atmosphere that makes everyone feel welcome. We go above and beyond to meet our customer's needs, sharing our knowledge and passion for the outdoors and helping you find the perfect products.

"We want everyone to be treated warmly. If someone needs to be handed off to another employee, it should be done warmly and not pushy," he adds. "We try to find exactly what you're looking for. We don't have to sell a camper because it has age on it. We want to sell a camper because the customer wants it."

The customer-centric statement is posted at every workstation and is part of the onboarding process.

"The difference crosses over from sales into parts, service, finance – even administration. It reaches all levels. We ask that all of our employees really live by it," Joe Starett says. "When a customer visits us, we never want that customer to feel as if no one had time for them. We hope a customer has five employees who have said, 'Is anyone helping you? How can I help you?' during their visit."

When it came to the store, Gina Starett took it upon herself to make it more than just a typical RV supplies and parts shop.

"I noticed that when we set up our location in Westin, the customer would come in and see all the hard parts: freshwater, blackwater, lighting, bug screens and propane. It's all great and we know people need that, but as a woman, none of that appealed to me," she explains. "I thought we had to dress it up a bit at the new location with things you wouldn't normally find. There are



Lead PDI technician Ray Johnson (left) confers with a customer regarding the various equipment and features on a new travel trailer. The dealership employs eight technicians – two technicians in the body shop and six others who do PDIs and work the service and warranty bays.

10 aisles of just fun stuff that includes rugs, camping pet supplies, kitchen items, camping wrapping paper and more.”

The couple recently expanded the parts department to carry marine parts and furniture. But they took it one step further, so customers could have a hands-on RV experience with those products thanks to two waiting areas completely filled with RV furniture, an RV entertainment center, an RV fireplace, and DISH Network.

“Customers are coming from two hours away just so they can try out and feel the furniture for themselves,” Gina Starett says. “We have eight RV couches, five to six RV chairs, all different styles, including recliners, euro chairs, leather and cloth.”

Service, Sales & Training

The dealership carries inventory from Forest River, Starcraft, Alliance RV, Prime Time, Braxton Creek and Keystone RV, with plans to add Winnebago motorhomes later this year.

Their method for choosing what products they carry?

“It was pretty much whatever line was open at the time,” Joe Starett says. “We didn’t realize you have a circle radius. I spoke to a lot of reps who first told me if it was available or not. When it was all settled, we got in some great products and had a really good setup.”

The couple had all fall and winter to look at lots of customer reviews and create an in-depth checklist to decide which product lines to carry. Joe Starett says customer reviews were the most important deciding factor in selecting RV manufacturers.

Beyond carrying quality brands, the Starett family has made a major commitment to investing in their people. The dealership employs eight technicians – two technicians in the body shop and six others who do PDIs, and work the service and warranty bays.

“We’re hoping to expand that as we grow,” Joe Starett says. “We take pride in our body shop. We have two bays designated for body work. We have the largest body shop in West Virginia. Our lead guy has 40-plus years of experience. We do work ranging on units from small travel trailers to Class A diesel pushers. If someone comes in and needs something that isn’t made anymore, we fab it. We match paint. We do everything. We just added another hire in that department.”

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In addition to retailing RVs, the dealership sells a wide selection of outdoor equipment, including outdoor grills, chairs, coolers and kayaks. Here, parts sales rep Matt McKee (left) highlights for sales rep TJ Smith some of the features on one of the three kayak brands that Mountaineer RV sells.



Detailer Dustin Drevs washes a new RV. Mountaineer RV retails units from Forest River, Starcraft, Alliance RV, Prime Time, Braxton Creek and Keystone RV, with plans to add Winnebago motorhomes later this year.

Meanwhile, the couple spent nearly \$30,000 on training over one winter.

“One thing we believe in strongly is training. We have some Level 2 certified technicians and one master certified technician. We provide ongoing education. We want all our technicians to be Level 3 certified. We’re willing to train them up,” Joe Starett says.

The dealership also takes advantage of a grant program through the state of West Virginia that reimburses on-the-job training for new-hire incumbent workers that qualify for the program.

“We participate with them to help increase success for our employees and build their knowledge base,” Joe Starett says. “The state provides a percentage of that money put out for employees, back to the employer, between 75 to 90 percent of employees’ wages or training dollars are reimbursed back through the state for the ones that qualify for their program.”

The dealership also has a designated detail bay and detail crew.

“It’s something we pride ourselves on. Dennis is our detail lead and is very thorough and meticulous. He and his team run over the units with a fine-tooth comb,” Gina Starett says.

A unique outdoor center is part of the dealership the Starett family have built. Before starting the RV dealership, Joe Starett participated in kayak fishing tournaments, winning two national championships. He brought this passion into the dealership, retailing the specific fishing-style kayaks starting in 2019. Mountaineer RV and Outdoor Center was the No. 1 dealer of that kayak in the nation, beating out California and Florida, for 2019.



Sales rep Daniel Turner (right) assists a customer considering the purchase of a new RV.

"I know that kayak world and have the knowledge behind it," he says. "I've spent many hours in the water on it. I can help a customer tremendously. We do demos and even take the customer out on the water and let them try it out."

Looking Forward

As for the future, the couple would like to add an RV rentals business and expand to more locations, adding southern locations, so they can experience four-season selling.

"We have a huge desire and passion to see the family unit be pulled together through camping. We love our campers, and whether it's their first time buying or upgrading, we love that they're out there spending time together," says Gina Starett. "The family unit is taxed, and we love that they're getting time out there that's simple."

"Our business is also a ministry. We pour into our customers. We have prayer here often and we use this as a tool and a ministry," she adds. "We believe without a doubt that this is why we have been so successful in such a short amount of time."

The couple also imagine a day when their children, Emma and Hunter, will take over the business.

Eighteen-year-old Emma recently graduated high school and attends college while also running the dealership's social media and marketing initiatives. She's worked as a cashier, detailed units, done inventory and found her niche in marketing.

Hunter is 15 years old and works after school and during the summer. He started in detailing and will move into a parts runner position this summer so he can get a feel for the parts he's handling.

"He'll stock shelves, run parts. We want him to experience all facets of the business," Gina Starett says. "We do have hopes that they at some point can run the business and take it over so mom and dad can sit back and watch and enjoy." **RV2**

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Q&A

with RVWA's Susan Carpenter and Denise Chariya

By Ronnie Wendt

The duo discusses RVWA's first-ever symposium and other planned events for 2022, plus the Alliance's goals for the future.

RVWA members network during a special event the night before the 2020 NTP-STAG Expo in Texas. RVWA often hosts events in conjunction with shows or other industry events. (Photo by RV PRO)



Even a global pandemic can't hold back the RV Women's Alliance.

The nonprofit group's number of members has swelled from about 200 when it started in 2019 to about 1,400 members (women as well as men) currently, representing more than 400 companies.

It's been quite a journey for the organization, the idea for which came about after RV industry members recognized that other outdoor industry groups had benefited from having a women's organization. Industry veteran Susan Carpenter has spearheaded the group since the beginning.

Initially, RVWA membership growth came at a slow, steady pace. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, shutting down businesses and in-person gatherings, it threatened to derail the progress the organization was making. Not wanting to lose momentum, RVWA leadership did everything possible to keep going, hosting virtual meetings for nearly two years.

That included having RVWA members gather outside and in small groups to revitalize an aging 2007 Crossroads RV trailer, taking it from "Drab to Fab". The nonprofit group posted photos and videos of the rehab online, and as people checked those out, the organization grew.

As the pandemic recedes, RVWA plans to maintain a hybrid model of gathering, hosting in-person and virtual events designed for women in the RV industry across the United States, ensuring that educational and networking opportunities are accessible for the full membership.

RV PRO recently spoke at length with Carpenter, RVWA's president, and Denise Chariya, RVWA board member and marketing director at THOR Industries, to learn more about what's in the works for RVWA in 2022. Their answers have been lightly edited for grammar and style.



RVWA members recently gathered at the RV/MH Hall of Fame. Pictured from left to right, back row, are: Kim Gregory with Coach-Net, Denise Chariya with THOR Industries, John Tinghitella with RV Designer, and Karen Barnett with Valley Screen Printing. Pictured in the front row, from left to right, are: RVWA Managing Director Jessica Rider, Pamela Vandermel with Lippert, RVWA President Susan Carpenter, and Tracy Anglemeyer with the RV Technical Institute. (Photo by Steve Toepp/Midwest Photographics)



RVWA President Susan Carpenter (left) and RVWA Managing Director Jessica Rider are excited about all of the opportunities the nonprofit group will be offering in 2022, including a first-ever educational symposium in October in Chicago. (Photo by Steve Toepp/Midwest Photographics)

RV PRO: How did Drab to Fab change RVWA?

Carpenter: We really came into our own with Drab to Fab. It put us on the map.

COVID-19 forced us to figure out an alternative format for education and networking. Often, we focused on the Elkhart area because much of the industry is based here.

But the pandemic forced us into other formats. This gave us an opportunity to loop in industry professionals located elsewhere. For instance, we brought dealers from all over the country into virtual groups.

Things worked so well that we plan to embrace a hybrid meeting model going forward. We see the benefit of creating virtual and in-person experiences so everyone can take part.

Though we may hold networking events locally, we're creating toolkits for RVWA groups in other areas to replicate these experiences. We also will hold our virtual book club three times this year. That is open to everyone.

RV PRO: RVWA plans to hold its first-ever symposium Oct. 11-12 in Chicago. What are your goals and hopes for that event?

Chariya: The mission of RVWA is to elevate, educate and promote women in the RV industry. That mission is the foundation of the 2022 Education Symposium and its educational events. The symposium will focus on leadership and provide attendees with different opportunities to connect.

It is RVWA's first large in-person event. We are holding it in Chicago to make it accessible for members all over the country. We designed the symposium to celebrate women within the industry while also giving them opportunities to learn and grow.

One of the greatest things about RVWA is we have members on the OEM, supplier, aftermarket and dealership side. The symposium provides all these groups with an opportunity to connect, see the challenges of others and learn how we can best support each other.

We also will hold our first annual awards ceremony at the end of the first day.

RV PRO: What educational tracks will the symposium offer?

Carpenter: There will be four sessions over two days – one each morning and one each afternoon. One session is called Effective Coaching, Communicating and Listening. The other one is called Idea, Inclusion, Diversity, Equity and Access.

We will split attendees into two groups for these sessions. One will comprise current leaders (somebody who has been in a leader-



U.S. Rep. Jackie Walorski (center, in white jacket) was the special invited guest of RVWA during an event the organization hosted during Elkhart Open House Week in 2019. (Photo by RV PRO)



RVWA members socialize at the RV/MH Hall of Fame in Elkhart, Ind., during the organization's Drab to Fab Reveal event in June 2021. RVWA offers a number of virtual and in-person events in order for RVWA members to connect. (Photo courtesy of RVWA)



Pictured here is the fully renovated Drab to Fab trailer, which RVWA named the Chrysalis. After renovating and showcasing the trailer, RVWA hosted a drawing where participants had the opportunity to win the trailer. The proceeds from the drawing helped fund other RVWA activities. (Photo by RV PRO)



RVWA's Special Projects Committee Chair Tracy Anglemeyer (left) and Carpenter reminisce about the many hours spent renovating the trailer during the Reveal event. Above right: Attendees at RVWA's Reveal event tour the renovated trailer. (Photo by RV PRO)

ship position for some time), the other emerging leaders (somebody who is new to a leadership role or wants to get into leadership).

Both groups will learn the same thing, but on a different level. What's nice is two people at different levels can participate in the educational tracks and later discuss what they learned. They both understand how to apply the material, just at different levels.

RV PRO: What is RVWA's mentorship program and what is your vision for that?

Carpenter: We see a tremendous opportunity to create a mentorship program that aligns people from diverse backgrounds and distinct parts of the industry. We want to facilitate connections and help our members learn from someone they don't work with day to day.

Many companies do mentorship programs, but we believe it's important to have an industrywide program that is not company specific to encourage cross-communication. You can gain knowledge and perspective when you speak and work with peers outside your company.

Chariya: We started with a pilot program but will formally launch our mentorship program at the symposium. To take part, members must fill out an application that helps us match people to mentors based on their career goals, the areas they want to work in, and the skills they hope to develop.

RV PRO: What else can people expect from RVWA in the year ahead?

Carpenter: We will continue our focus on education. Besides the symposium, we will also host workshops. We have at least two planned for the balance of the year, besides three book clubs and other educational content. All content will be available on demand after each event.

Last year, we held over 25 educational events or workshops virtually and had over 230 members participated. We want to continue to offer these opportunities. Education is a key component of the value we bring to our members.

RV PRO: How has the representation of women in the industry changed since 2019?

Carpenter: We did a second impact study in October; our first was in 2019. The study discovered a 16 percent increase in women in the industry since 2019.

There are many reasons for this. A lot of women lost their jobs during the pandemic, but still had to make a living. Our industry – which is booming – also did not slow down during the pandemic; thus, people gravitated toward it. This also presented an opportunity to bring in more women.

RV PRO: How can RVWA help newcomers to the industry?

Chariya: There are many people joining this industry without an RV background. RVWA is a great resource to help them learn. It's filled with people who can get them up to speed faster and help them learn how the industry works.

It's exciting to see the growth of women in this industry as RVWA focuses on elevating and promoting women. It is a testament to the work of the industry to represent women well.

Carpenter: It is important to RVWA that, as women enter this industry, we do what we can to give them a place to belong. The RV industry operates differently. It's difficult to integrate into it when you don't understand how it works.

It's a vital part of our mission to give women the resources they need to succeed through networking and mentorship to develop a sense of community and a place to ask questions.

Chariya: We want to bring people to the industry, but we also want to help keep them in it. Our vision is to make the RV industry a place for women to thrive; a place where women can be successful, grow and feel supported.

RV PRO: What work remains as the number of women in the industry grows?

Carpenter: There's always room for improvement. As women look at their long-term goals, we want them to consider the RV industry.

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To us, elevate does not mean we elevate women into higher paychecks. Rather, we provide a means to showcase women working in the industry every day.

We plan to introduce a profile of a woman in this industry twice weekly and put it out on our social media. We want to say, 'Here's Anna, and she does this job. This is her background, etc.' We hope doing so will inspire other women and lead them where they want to go.

RV PRO: What can the industry do to attract more women?

Carpenter: Our purpose is not necessarily to attract women to the industry. We have enough companies that will do that.

We want women who research the RV industry to know there is a woman's alliance. We want women to become members and stay in this industry because they recognize that it values women.

Chariya: We've made huge progress in the number of women in this industry. But a lot of longstanding relationships still exist at the higher level between men.

Providing a space for women to make connections is vital. We also know that women and men communicate differently. So, these opportunities and how they're set up must be different.

We strive to support women already in the industry and those entering it by supplying the right opportunities to make connections.

RV PRO: What are your plans for the RVWA book club in the year ahead?

Chariya: We have a committee that selects the books. Our goal with the books we read is to pick a topic that can apply to multiple levels of women.

We like agnostic, broader topics that can apply regardless of the part of the industry you work in. These book clubs are a fantastic way to start a conversation and have a lot of impact.

We select books one quarter ahead. Then, depending on the length of the book, we divide the book club into two or three evening sessions. We provide a discussion guide but also look for con-

versations to happen organically and turn into productive communication between members.

RV PRO: What kinds of service projects does RVWA have planned in 2022?

Chariya: We are really excited about our focus on service projects for 2022. We saw so much success in giving women the opportunity to work together in Drab to Fab.

We're looking to create more of those experiences through partnerships with organizations offering volunteer opportunities. Not everybody does well in a traditional networking setting. It's not always easy to walk into a room of obvious strangers and start networking.

But when you sign up for a Habitat for Humanity event – something we do every year – you sign up for a purpose. You talk as you work, and networking becomes organic.

RV PRO: What do you see ahead for the industry as high fuel prices, inflationary pressures, labor challenges and parts shortages proliferate?

Carpenter: Fuel prices don't have a significant impact on our industry. Those who love the lifestyle will still get out there.

With staffing, we're in the same boat as the rest of the country. As for the number of units we produce and sell, we will see a correction to a more sustainable number of units sold, rather than this hair-on-fire situation we've been dealing with.

We remain incredibly positive about the future. This puts even more pressure on RVWA to provide value. We exist to elevate and educate women and to act as a strong presence in the industry to ready it for the future.

RV PRO: How can people join RVWA or attend the symposium?

Carpenter: Anyone who wants to be a member and get on the early bird list for symposium tickets can visit www.rvwa.org. **RV2**

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King of the Airwaves



Susan King serves as the CEO of KING, directing close to 100 employees for the connectivity company. Her role complements that of her husband, Lael King, who founded the business and who today is exclusively focused on product development.

By K. Schipper

Woman-led KING prospers thanks in part to its focus on creative problem-solving, making its products easy to use, having a good team and valuing diversity.

When it comes to marriage, Susan and Lael King are partners in every sense of the word. As an inventor, it was his products that formed the basis for KING, but it's her management that has grown the company as it morphed into the RV industry.

Recognizing early on campers' desire for a satellite system to enjoy their favorite programs away from home, KING was the first to develop a stationary automatic system under a dome. From there, the company has expanded into about every other type of connectivity, from Wi-Fi range extenders to satellite TV and over-the-air visual and audio reception.

More importantly, at a time when many people curse the complexity of their electronics, KING prides itself on making products that are easy to install and use. Or, as the company's motto proclaims, it's "Simply better, by design."

A Good Team

A great deal of that simplicity of design can be credited to company founder Lael King. Like many other companies, KING was launched in the couple's basement in 1985. Susan King explains the company's initial product was based on an automatic car starter he had developed.

"He ended up selling the product and never was compensated as planned," she says. "At that point, he was looking at other things in the same category. He had an associate that was in the trucking industry, and they needed some engine monitors for idling."

After developing that product, Lael King got into cruise controls and other kinds of engine controls for trucks, including pressure controls for firetrucks. The company's biggest products became cruise controls and speed limiters for both trucks and RVs.

"That came about because we got a contract, first with Spartan Chassis and then with Freightliner Trucks, which both support RVs," Susan King explains.

However, KING was also up against a changing marketplace. Thanks to emissions mandates, engines of all sorts were moving



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KING



KING manufactures a variety of connectivity solutions, including satellite TV antennas, Wi-Fi antennas and range extenders, cell phone signal boosters and over-the-air digital HDTV antennas.

Started as a home-based business, KING today operates out of a 41,000-square-foot building (pictured) in the Minneapolis suburb of Bloomington that houses the company's offices, production facilities and warehouse space.



away from mechanical systems toward electronic ones. It was that realization that encouraged the company to look at other products.

"We knew the diesel engines we were controlling would no longer need our kinds of products," Susan King says. "We began looking for other products – and eventually came upon a satellite system back when satellite was in its infancy. And, from there, we just took off with it."

It's not surprising that the Kings ended up going in the direction of products for RVs. Avid RVers for more than 30 years, Susan King says it's common for one or the other of them to come up with an idea for a new product or an improvement to an existing one while camping.

Today, Lael King is exclusively involved in product development. The difference is the company has an engineering team to collaborate with him, and a larger staff to help suggest ideas.

"He's looking at product ideas and building prototypes" says Susan King. "He's completely on the creative side now."

However, the success of KING is truly due to the partnership of Lael and Susan King. Not only did the business launch in her basement, but in its early years, Susan King had the not inconsequential role of supporting the family while working as a registered nurse in the ICU unit of the University of Minnesota Medical Center.

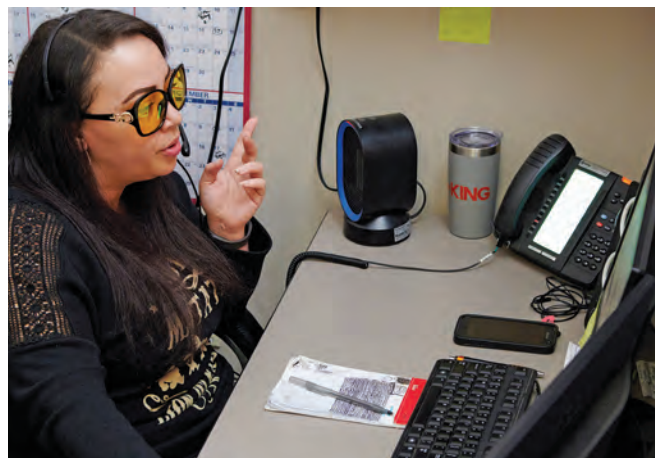
"Eventually, Lael needed more help with administrative things – he's admittedly not good at that – so I left my job in nursing and began working for KING full time," she says. "We're a pretty good team and we don't step on each other's toes very often, so it's worked out pretty well."

The Value of Diversity

Today, Susan King serves as the company's CEO, directing close to 100 employees from its headquarters in the Minneapolis suburb of Bloomington, and a second facility in Elkhart, Ind. However, she's quick to stress that she and her husband are only two cogs in a much bigger wheel.



In addition to its main building in Minnesota (pictured), KING also has another facility in Elkhart in order to be close to its OEM customers.



Customer tech support member Korrin Hollie assists a customer. KING credits its success in part to having a good team in place and valuing diversity at all levels within the business.



Matt Lubker with KING is shown holding the Best New Product Runner-Up award he received on behalf of KING's Extended Go Portable Cell Phone Booster at the 2021 Northern Wholesale Supply RV Supershow. KING also won the Best New Product award for its KING Falcon at the 2019 Northern show and the RVAA Product of the Year Award for its RV Media Bluetooth Weatherproof Speaker and Awning Light in 2016.

Right: KING supports its dealer customers in a variety of ways, including with merchandising assistance through its endcap displays, as well as technical assistance.



"We've got a really outstanding team here," Susan King says. "We set the stage, but our employees really have done a lot of the heavy lifting. They're the ones responsible for our very low return rate. We have outstanding quality, and that's just the culture here."

And, yes, with a woman at the helm, the culture at KING is a little atypical. Not only does the company recognize that people have lives outside of work, but in an industry that has the reputation of being dominated by white men, diversity is one of its core values.

"Half of our leadership team is composed of women," Susan King says. "In production, a little under half are women. Our crew is remarkably diverse; we represent a number of sexual orientations, ethnicities and religions."

The reason behind the approach is quite simple: diverse backgrounds generate diverse ideas and diverse solutions to problems.

"You've got two different places that a man comes from versus a woman, and we incorporate that into our decision-making," she says. "I think it's really enhanced our company, and the men who work here really embrace the camaraderie and the idea exchange."

Craig Miller, KING's president, agrees, although he stresses the company hires for ability.

"It just makes you think of things a bit differently," Miller says. "Our success is often due to the diverse ideas we have here, and the female influences that we have here, and the collaborative efforts that we have here."

Susan King believes another result of that diversity is the company's reputation for producing exceptionally high-quality products.

"We're super proud of our return rate, which is less than 1 percent," she says. "With half of those, no defect is found. It just speaks volumes about the team here because you don't have that if you don't have



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*“We’re super proud of our return rate,
which is less than 1 percent.”*

– Susan King, KING’s CEO

a team that’s really focused on quality. Everyone in the company plays a piece in our quality.”

Besides serving as KING’s headquarters, the 41,000-square-foot facility in Bloomington houses product development, the company’s call center and production, as well as warehouse space. Not only are its products assembled from components shipped in from elsewhere, but Susan King says all are evaluated and the information stored before they head out the door, providing extra backup if there is a problem.

A 10,000-square-foot facility in Elkhart also has offices, a training center and storage that exclusively services the company’s OEM customers.

“Out of this facility, we ship to distributors, we ship some dealer direct, and we ship to national accounts, such as Camping World,” says Miller. “We also do fulfillment for Amazon. We ship international to Europe, Australia and New Zealand. And DISH is a partner of ours. It’s a pretty diverse set of products and a very diverse set of customers.”

Removing the Mystery

Because its customer base is so diverse, KING takes several different approaches to supporting everyone from dealers to the RV manufacturers.

While much of its aftermarket business goes through two-step distribution with NTP-STAG, the company has a full-blown in-house marking department, according to Miller. However, key to that effort is its regional sales managers who provide dealership training.

“All our salespeople are so well-trained on our products that they can conduct sales training wherever they go,” adds Susan King. “We also support them through attending shows, offering show discounts on occasion, and providing marketing dollars. Sometimes we help with some of the marketing design.”

Both Miller and Susan King stress that the RV owner isn’t going to need to be trained on how to use one of KING’s devices.

“We pride ourselves in building technology that is people-literate,” says Miller. “Our technology understands you. It does what you want it to do, the way you want it to work. We tell people to just press a button or turn it on. Other businesses get lost in complexity.”

However, he adds that it’s KING’s job to make sure the people selling its products in the aftermarket can have detailed conversations with RV owners about Wi-Fi, LTE and satellite television.

“It can become a jumbled mess for most people – and it’s our job to demystify it,” he says. “And, by demystifying it all, rest assured, people are going to want to buy our products because

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they're better than everybody else's."

Elkhart is the home-base for the company's head of OEM sales, although KING also has an independent rep group it uses in Elkhart, as well as reps in Forest City, Iowa, and on the West Coast.

"It's a combination of KING employees and reps that serve the complicated OEM community," says Miller. "At this point, everybody wants to be connected, so the OEMs are building our products into everything from the lowest-end travel trailers to the highest-end diesel pushers."

Susan King adds that she feels the idea that people want to leave their cares – and devices – behind when they head out in their RVs is outdated.

"There's a wide variety of units in the marketplace," she says. "You have units that are set up to be remote offices. You have units for young families. You have units that are more luxurious. But, across the board there's a movement for connectivity."

Being Creative

So, with a quickly evolving demand for both entertainment and connectivity, how does KING stay on top of what consumers want? Some of it is simply that the company has innovation in its DNA, as KING holds some 30 patents for its various products.

However, Miller says it's also the result of work.

"We work hard to understand human needs," he says. "You have to be paying attention to the market, to the technology and the users."

Further complicating matters has been the COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout. Susan King says the company initially shut down for nine weeks in early 2020, reopening about the same time many of the OEMs resumed production.

"We were going gangbusters from the moment we reopened," she says. "However, the supply issues are well-known across the entire world, and we have not been immune from that."

Not only have KING's shipping costs gone up as much as sixfold, but Susan King says she and the company's director of human resources recently joined the pur-

chasing department in a two-day scramble to find resin after an order fell through.

"We have had to be extremely creative to keep product going out the door," she says. "Our engineering department has had to call out different materials. When we're solving problems, we often lean on each other, and that works quite well."

She's justifiably proud of the fact that no order from an OEM has gone unfilled, despite the supply issues.

As with other companies, KING also has faced the issue of hiring good people throughout the pandemic.

"We have an employee referral program, and we're using temp agencies to hire for production workers," says Susan King. "That's worked very well. We get to try them out for 90 or 120 days, and the ones we've liked we end up hiring."

Miller adds that it's not easy to get hired at KING, because people need to not only have the proper skills, but they must be a good cultural fit. But, he says, once people are hired, they want to stay.

Particularly when it comes to materials, Susan King says she is quite confident the company will continue to meet its commitments – although in the short term she doesn't think things will get easier.

"To date we've been able to answer those challenges quite well," she says. "But it's increasingly challenging. We've been creative, creative, creative."

As for the year ahead, neither King nor Miller is prepared to say much. KING is, as its CEO points out, a privately held company.

Miller does give some hint about future markets when he says, "Part of our vision is mobile first, home second. We're very focused on mobile and that's where most of our business is done, but the home market is on our radar."

In general, though, he expects KING's 2022 activities to disrupt competitors and delight customers.

"Our goal is to make sure people are connected all the time," Miller says. "We want to offer a range of devices that allow our customers to be connected the way they want to be connected." **RV**

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A Landmark Decision

By John McCurry

With its 20-year anniversary drawing near, Heartland RV's luxury Landmark fifth wheel is not resting on its many laurels.

Heartland RV's flagship luxury fifth wheel brand, Landmark, will enter new territory as it approaches its 20th anniversary in 2023: It will debut its first shorter – 38-foot – fifth wheel during September's Elkhart Open House Week.

"We are excited about the new shorter model because we really think there is a market for it," says Andy Wesdorp, general manager for Heartland's Landmark, Bighorn and Traveler fifth wheel brands. "A lot of the new parks can accommodate the 45 foot motorhomes, but there is still a luxury buyer who doesn't want a 44-foot, five-slide fifth wheel. They want something a little shorter – something that might make them feel more comfortable going down the road. This is going to be right in the sweet spot for length and traditional layout."

Heartland is playing it somewhat conservative with the shorter model, Wesdorp says, mentioning a more traditional layout. The RV maker is not releasing many details, but to be sure, it will have some "cool" Landmark flair to it, he says.

Heartland was founded in 2003, with Landmark as one of its initial fifth wheels. Today, it is one of the company's six fifth wheel brands, alongside the Bighorn, Bighorn Traveler, Big Country, Elkridge and Milestone.

Market data firm Stat Surveys ranked Heartland RV fifth in market share among fifth wheel makers in 2021.

"The core of the company has always been fifth wheels – and that's what I'm extremely proud to be a part of," Wesdorp says. "Landmark is a full-timer's dream. It's a high-end fifth wheel with

PHOTOS COURTESY OF HEARTLAND RV UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED



Andy Wesdorp, general manager for Heartland's Landmark, Bighorn and Traveler fifth wheel brands, is pictured in the galley of a Landmark fifth wheel. Wesdorp touts the many luxury amenities – including the true maple hardwood, farmhouse sinks and custom-built vinyl furniture – that come standard in Heartland's top-of-the-line fifth wheel. (Photo by Steve Toepp/Midwest Photographics)



high-end fit and finish. It has a laundry list of standard features, most of which are not even options on other fifth wheels.”

Landmark is currently available in five floorplans.

“Like most lineups, we have our two or three bestsellers, and then we try to bring some new innovations, technology or decor every year,” Wesdorp says. “All of the floorplans we have now are big and bold units – bath-and-a-half and more slide-outs.”

Innovation by Design

Landmark’s long list of innovations has solidified its strong standing among fifth wheels, according to Wesdorp. Many of those fall into the first-to-market category. This includes a mix of signature construction features.

For example, Landmark boasts 60 percent larger brakes than standard 2-inch brakes. Landmark is Heartland’s only fifth wheel to feature three standard 15,000-BTU air conditioners, for 45,000 total BTUs of cooling power.

Meanwhile, Wesdorp credits Landmark’s all-female design team with crafting a look attractive to buyers, with updates coming every two to three years.

“We try to stay ahead of the trends in the industry, which are typically a year or two behind traditional residential home trends,” he says. “We don’t want to look like everybody else, but we don’t want to be so different that we aren’t appealing to customers, so it’s a delicate balance of standing out with visual impact.”

There are also many under-the-skin details. Landmark uses high-end motorhome-based construction, such as laminated main level floors and upper deck floors. Wesdorp says this feature is unique in the world of fifth wheels.

“That is a concept that we brought to fifth wheels when we launched the company 20 years ago,” he says. “That was one of our core competencies. You have to be a believer in the axles and the tires, so we use some industry-leading brands that stand behind what they sell us.”

Heartland has long promoted the quality of the inner workings of its units. Wesdorp cites a company marketing piece created a few years ago touting: “What You Can’t See” in a Heartland product. The brochure suggests important questions to consider.

“If you are going to make an investment in a high-end fifth wheel, or a high-end motorhome, or even an entry-level travel trailer, you should ask questions about how it is built,” he says.

The Landmark features thick Azdel fortified sidewall construction, 8,000-pound Dexter axles on H-range tires with 3-3/8-inch brakes, a MORryde LRE 4000 suspension and gas shocks, plus a three-sided accessible basement for 30 percent more storage.



Wesdorp touts the Landmark as being the first RV maker to offer decorative shower enclosures. “Instead of just going with traditional standard white or cream one-piece fiberglass shower, we have partnered with a couple of different suppliers to offer decorative patterns and colors in the showers,” he says.



The Landmark is built with full-timers in mind, according to Wesdorp. Thanks to its insulated construction and its three standard 15,000-BTU air conditioners for 45,000 total BTUs of cooling power, it is equally at home in warm and cooler climates.

“How is it going to stand up to weather? How is it going to stand up to potholes and railroad tracks at 55 mph? How is it going to heat and cool? How is the wiring built?”

Differentiating Details

Numerous small details help differentiate Landmark. For example, wires are loomed to prevent chafing. Units are equipped with whole-house surge protection. Landmarks are also equipped with whole-house water filtration.

“It might seem silly, but we put aluminum frames and aluminum angle gussets in the four corners of every window, even though there is a cheaper way to do that with plastic inserts,” Wesdorp said. “We build our own aluminum walls and we think that is just a better way to build RVs. You never know when a part is going to extend the lifespan. We try to add those details whenever we can.”

Wesdorp notes that many RVers buy with their eyes, so developing the right look for Landmark is crucial.

“Something cosmetic that’s gone over great, and that I’m proud of, is we were the first to offer decorative shower enclosures,” Wesdorp says. “Instead of just going with traditional standard white or cream one-piece fiberglass shower, we have partnered with a couple of different suppliers to offer decorative patterns and colors in the showers.”

On the inside, all of the wood is true maple hardwood. Amenities include Farmhouse-style sinks, and a power tilt bed mechanism in every bedroom, something Wesdorp says is a market first. Landmark, working with MORryde, debuted the power bed for fifth wheels in 2019. The popular addition is now standard, adding 23 inches of bedroom floor space when fully tilted. It also enables the bed to be tilted upward for occupants reading in bed.

Landmark also has pioneered other advancements in the bedroom.

“About four years ago, we were able to work with an engineering team to innovate the industry’s first walk-in closets,” Wesdorp says. “Like most innovations, it’s been borrowed by others in the industry, but it has been a great feature for us.”

Additionally, last fall, Landmark unveiled what Wesdorp describes as the industry’s first three-slide bedroom in its Scottsdale version. He says the unit’s slide and the front windshield have made it a popular addition.

A few years ago, Heartland introduced its Super Store More basement, which is now patent-pending.

“We were able to open up the front gooseneck baggage compartment and open it up to the main pass-through exterior door-side and off-door side storage, so it added about 30 percent to the overall basement exterior storage,” Wesdorp says. “It gives you three points of access to get to your gear.”

Landmark’s design team draws on residential housing trends for much of their inspiration. Great effort is made to avoid being a “me-too” brand with the same colors and countertops as competitors. Once a cabinet/linoleum countertop is selected, coordinating features such as faucets and window treatments are added.

“We are in early development for what the dealers will see at the September Open House,” Wesdorp says. “We’re not ready to reveal those yet, but they will be some energizing products, inside and out, for the Landmark brand. Dealers will come away very happy with what we will introduce.”

The inclusion of a MORryde air compressor has been a popular exterior improvement.

“You don’t need one until you do, and they are not commonly



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Wesdorp is pictured in front of a 40-plus-foot Landmark. For this year's upcoming Open House Week, Landmark will debut its first shorter fifth wheel, coming in at 38 feet. Wesdorp says specifics on the fiver are under wraps for now, but he says he expects dealers to be impressed with the model. (Photo by Steve Toepp/Midwest Photographics)

"Landmark is a full-timer's dream. It's a high-end fifth wheel with high-end fit and finish. It has a laundry list of standard features, most of which are not even options on other fifth wheels."

– Andy Wesdorp, general manager for Heartland's Landmark, Bighorn and Traveler fifth wheel brands



In the bedroom, the Landmark features a power-tilt bed mechanism, which adds 23 inches of extra space when fully tilted. It's a nice design feature for Landmark owners who want to read in bed.

available in RV parks, so we just decided to put one right on the exterior of the RV," Wesdorp says. What's neat about that is that not only will it inflate a 17-1/2-inch tire, but we also ran a connector air hose port on the off-door side of the unit, so with a quick connect air hose that comes with the kit, you can inflate tires on both sides of the coach. That's been a fantastic feature."

Not Your 'Typical' RVer

The majority of Landmark buyers are considered full-timers, according to Wesdorp. Most typically stay in nicer parks and usually head south to Florida or Texas for the winter. Summertime sees many Landmark full-timers parked in Michigan, New York and other northern states.

With a MSRP ranging from the low \$180,000s to \$198,000, Landmark is a definite luxury purchase. Wesdorp describes Landmark's customer base of a mix of people who are retired, about to retire, or in good shape with their retirement plan.

"They are a very savvy buying group," he says. "They have often owned four or five RVs before. They've gone through the evolution is small travel trailer, bigger travel trailer, small fifth wheel, bigger fifth wheel, and now they are ready for a full-time piece."

Heartland has a network of about 70 Landmark dealers in North America. They are more concentrated in the South and West, where weather is more conducive to year-round sales. Dealers appreciate the fact that Landmark strives to be a first-to-market brand, according to Wesdorp.

"Dealers know that every year, or a few times every year, we are going to introduce a feature that hasn't been done in the RV industry before," he says. "They get to sell it before anyone else sees it. I don't like the term 'industry-first' – that's worn out and a bit of a cliché. 'First to market' is a much better way to express that we innovated and we introduced it first. That's what our dealers appreciate about the brands."

The Landmark sales team, which is also the Bighorn team, consists of Wesdorp and three regional sales managers: one in Florida representing the Southeast, one in Southern California covering the West Coast and one at Heartland's Elkhart headquarters covering a region stretching from the Midwest to Texas.

"With those guys combined, we have over 100 years of experience, which I would love to see anyone compare with ours," Wesdorp says. "We have deeply entrenched relationships with dealers. It's the four of us, then my senior GM."

Heartland RV hopes to increase production by 15 to 20 percent in 2022. That's slightly more than a typical year, but not a record. There's plenty of reason for optimism, Wesdorp says, as many dealers have deep backlogs and are clamoring for product.

"With the product we have coming out, we will continue to generate sales and energy," he says. "I feel good about 2022. Although I'm hoping that the COVID era is in the past, people still want to get outside. We are still looking to put people and their families in fifth wheels. It should be a great year." **RVF**

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Solar Awning Powers Off-Grid Adventures

Staff Reports

Xponent Power's Xpanse Solar Awning is designed to give RVers a solution for extended off-grid camping.

The RV industry's hottest trend is off-grid camping.

To address the accompanying need for extended off-grid power, Fremont, Calif.-based Xponent Power has developed the Xpanse Solar Awning, which is equipped with thin, high-efficiency, rigid solar panels that the company said provides shade while simultaneously generating up to 1,200 kilowatts of solar power to run RV onboard appliances.

The awning is the first commercially available retractable solar awning for RVs, according to Xponent Power founder and CEO Rohini Raghunathan, whose background includes more than nine years working in various leadership roles at renewable energy company SunEdison, according to her LinkedIn profile.

"Solar is the preferred source of power for RVs, but let's face it, roof space is limited. You're lucky if you can fit two or three large panels on the typical RV roof," she said in a company press release. "Our research indicates that RV owners overwhelmingly want to

go boondocking more often but are fundamentally limited by access to power. With the Xpanse Solar Awning, we are enabling RV owners to generate substantial power on the go so that they can go off-grid more often."

The Xpanse is available in three power options: 800 watts, 1,000 watts, and 1,200 watts, with the overwhelming majority of pre-orders thus far for the 1,200-watt version, demonstrating the desire for more power by RVers, according to Raghunathan.

Xponent says its awning is compatible with most RV makes and models, with no modifications required. The awning extends out almost 7 feet when expanded and measures about 16 feet across. It retracts into an enclosure that sits less than 6 inches off the edge of an RV door.

The standard version of the Xpanse requires two side arms to be placed 16 feet apart – and space on the RV to accommodate that. However, the company said it is currently working on a

Xponent Power says it's seeing plenty of consumer interest in its solar awning.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF XPONENT POWER



The Xpanse awning is comprised of thin, high-efficiency, rigid solar panels that the company says can generate up to 1,200 kilowatts of solar power to run RV onboard appliances. The company says the awning is durable to stand up to high winds.

next-generation version without sidearms that will work with smaller, Sprinter-like vans.

The Xpanse – which can mount on either side of an RV – provides flexibility to RVers who would like additional power but are not looking to replace an existing awning. It also can integrate with existing solar rooftop installations, extending the solar power generation capabilities beyond the roof of an RV, according to Xponent.

Xponent said the Xpanse has been in development since 2019, when the company incorporated. Developing the product required overcoming several obstacles, according to the company, including the ability to be retrofitted on both flat and curved RV roofs and to design a system that is only 6 inches deep (given that awnings cannot extend beyond 6 inches from the side of the vehicle) and yet be able to deliver over 1 kW of power when deployed.

“This meant that the module had to be ultra-compact and yet ultra-robust. This required tremendous level of innovation in the solar panel and wiring design on which we have filed several patents,” the company said.

“Finally, there is a lot of innovation we have on the intelligence of the system. This is a very smart awning,” the company said. “It is designed to detect wind and retract slightly at low-moderate wind speeds and completely retract to safety under high wind conditions. There is a lot of R&D and innovation we are doing to make this awning ultra-smart.”

According to Xponent, the Xpanse passed a series of rigorous tests that ensured its robustness.

“Traditional awnings that consist of a very large continuous piece of fabric experience huge wind uplift even at rather low wind speeds, very much like a sail,” said Raghunathan. “In con-



When not in use, the Xpanse retracts into a carrier mounted on top of an RV, similar to a traditional awning.



According to Xponent, the Xpanse is compatible with electrical components used in traditional solar installations on RVs, including charge controllers, batteries and inverters and can power onboard appliances including refrigerators, lights and microwaves.

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With a growing number of RVers wanting to camp off-grid, Xponent Power believes its Xpanse Solar Awning fills a need in the market.

trast, the Xpanse solar awning has an innovative, patented design that creates small gaps between the solar panels when they are slightly retracted.

"These gaps allow wind to pass through, greatly reducing the wind uplift and making the awning intrinsically wind-tolerant," she added. "This means the awning can be kept open and produce power even at relatively high wind speeds. What's especially great about this awning design is that it uses intelligence to detect wind speeds and to provide the necessary wind relief when needed."

According to Xponent, the Xpanse is compatible with electrical components used in traditional solar installations on RVs, including charge controllers, batteries and inverters, and can power onboard appliances including refrigerators, lights and microwaves.

Xponent debuted the Xpanse awning earlier this year at the Tacoma RV Show in Tacoma, Wash., where company officials said it generated strong customer appeal.

"The product was exceptionally well-received at the show and there was a lot of interest in the product from customers at the show," the company said. "We plan to continue to display our products at nationwide events in 2022 and beyond."

Xponent is currently taking orders for the Xpanse, which it hopes to bring to the market later this year. The retail price is expected to be \$10,000 and the company said financing may be available.

Many details regarding the Xpanse were still being finalized in early 2022. For example, the company has not specifically said if it will make the products itself or use a third party. It also has not specified what

retail channels it will use to sell the product or who will perform the awning installs (which are part of the product price).

"We have seen a strong interest from dealers, distributors, and OEMs in our product. We're currently exploring all sales channel options, including B2B partnerships both with OEMs/ dealers/ installers, as well as directly servicing the online orders," the company said. "In the longer run, our plan is to work with OEMs and a nationwide network of dealers and installers to install these systems on new and existing RVs."

The company declined to estimate how long it would take technicians to install one of its solar awnings, but it did say: "While we are unable to share exact details at this time, we have been able to meet our aggressive installation time targets during the prototype installations, and these align well with our aim to deliver a great customer and partner experience."

Looking to the future, Xponent says it is talks with automotive and RV manufacturers to provide the Xpanse solar awning as a pre-installed option on new vehicles.

"Xpanse is just the first step to creating more mobility-focused solar solutions," Raghunathan said. "With this disruptive technology platform, we are transitioning solar from a traditionally static to a dynamic and intelligent system, thereby enabling widespread solar adoption in new markets."

"We envision the adoption of our retractable solar technology platform in several diverse markets," she added, "such as mobile medical, military, police and emergency relief power, as well as tiny homes, apartments and more." **RVF**



Lippert Acquires Girard Products, Girard Systems

LCI Industries, through its wholly-owned subsidiary, Lippert Components Manufacturing, has acquired Girard Systems and Girard Products.

A purchase price was not disclosed. Terms of the deal were announced in late March.

Girard is a manufacturer and distributor of proprietary awnings and tankless water heaters for OEMs and aftermarket customers in the RV, specialty vehicle and related industries. The California-based company has served the RV industry since 1995 and is recognized for high quality and exceptional service, according to Lippert.

Having created a significant niche in the motorized segment of the market, Girard's patented awnings are featured on many of the premier Class A motorized units. Lippert said Girard's strategically-placed locations in Alabama, California and Indiana make it well-positioned to serve customers across the U.S. as it continues to grow.

"We are very excited to welcome the Girard team to the Lippert family," said Jason Lippert, president and CEO of Lippert. "We have admired how Girard's business has evolved over the years, focusing on a strong commitment to excellent customer service and creating strong brand loyalty among its key consumers. Girard product lines fall nicely into Lippert's core products and manufacturing competencies.

"Our sales and operations teams have big plans to take Girard's designs and products and expand them into broader customer channels," Jason Lippert added. "Girard's sophisticated product offerings for shade and appliances substantially broaden our product portfolio across all classes of RVs, enabling us to drive new content growth and further extend our leadership position in the outdoor recreation space."

"The addition of Girard will allow us to provide a wider range of exceptional products to our customers, especially in the higher-end motorized segment of the RV industry," said Ryan Smith, group president of Lippert, North America. "Girard's great product lines will further bolster our service offerings in categories that we're already strong in, perfectly aligning with our focus on enhancing the customer experience. We look forward to incorporating the deep industry and product knowledge that Girard will bring to the Lippert family as we work together to execute on our growth strategy."

"Through the last 27 years, we have worked to deliver high-quality products to consumers, paying particular attention to service and building lasting customer relationships," said Marcia Girard, CEO of Girard. "With similar values, along with its leading industry position and manufacturing expertise, Lippert is a great partner to carry our legacy forward. The entire Girard team is excited to join Lippert and begin working to further position the business for long-term growth."

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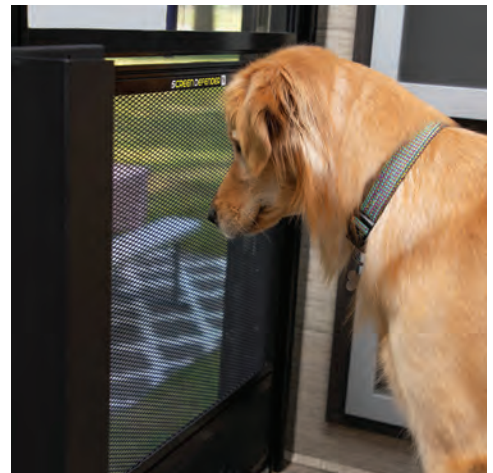
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SPECIAL PRODUCT FOCUS:

Camping and Pet Products

There's more to camping than meets the eye, from making a campsite more useful and enjoyable to caring for furry companions. Having the essentials to set up camp saves time for making memories in the great outdoors. This month's product focus spotlights camping and pet products ranging from portable campfires to pet life vests.

For more information on any of the products in this section, type the website address that appears below a respective listing into your web browser. Viewers of the magazine's digital version can click on any listing to be taken directly to the respective company's website.



ENTRY DOOR SCREEN PROTECTOR

Lippert, Elkhart, Ind., offers the Screen Defender. Inspired by RV owners with pets, the Screen Defender entry door screen protector by Lippert is a black, powder-coated aluminum screen that helps ensure pets can't damage or break through an existing Lippert entry screen door – keeping pets safe and RVs protected from unwanted damage.

www.lippert.com



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Stromberg Carlson, Traverse City, Mich., offers the Stake & Grill. From burgers to brats, coffee to tea – this is the way to cook when camping. The locking handle easily slides up and down the stake to adjust the heat and pivots away from the fire for loading and unloading of food. Hot dogs don't roll off with the up-turned edge on the heavy-duty grill. The chrome finish cleans easily and stores in a heavy-duty nylon bag. Measures 15" width by 22" length and includes a 36" long stake.

www.StrombergCarlson.com

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Dometic, Stockholm, Sweden, offers the CMP-T4 Compact Camp Table. Pack one table for all outdoor needs with the CMP-T4 Table. Quickly adjustable between three height options (coffee table, kids table and dining/prep), this table comfortably seats four for meals and game nights. Constructed with an elegant yet resilient bamboo surface, the Compact Table folds down to take only half the width of a vehicle's trunk. Combined with the integrated carrying handle, the CMP-T4 Table travels just as easy as RVers do.

www.dometic.com/en-us/outdoor





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www.camco.net



FIREWOOD LOGS AND STARTER

Green Mountain Firewood, Falmouth, Mass., presents the GMF Firewood Logs and Starter. At Green Mountain Firewood, the mission is to offer customers an elevated fire experience by providing a line of natural chemical-free firewood products. The company manufactures its products in Owensboro, Ky., using high-quality sawdust with no chemicals or additives. The logs are low moisture, produce very little smoke and are safe to cook on. The extrusion process kills all insects molds and fungus, making it safe to transport and easy to burn.

www.greenmountainfirewood.com

IONIC AIR PURIFIER

Coleman-Mach, an **Airxcel** brand, Wichita, Kan., offers its iWave-M Ionic Air Purifier. Using cold plasma ion technology, the iWave-M Ionic Air Purifier removes odors from pets or cooking and kills airborne mold, bacteria and virus spores for cleaner, more comfortable coach interiors. This innovative climate control accessory is installed inside existing Coleman-Mach air conditioners and ceiling assemblies, and it operates whenever the fan is on to break down pollutants and unwanted gasses lurking in an RV.



www.airxcel.com/rv/coleman-mach/climate-control-accessories



RV CLOTHESLINE

ReverseMate, Queensland, Australia, presents the All-In-One Clothesline for RVs. It can be fitted to the outside or under the awning with two lines. Suits Dometic, some Carefree, A&E and Lippert rollout awnings. Easy to install, no drilling needed, made from 316 stainless steel and will not rust. Stock available after June. Visit the company's website to see how to install the clothesline.

www.reversemate.com



COOLER FRIDGE/FREEZER

Truma, Elkhart, Ind., presents the Truma Cooler Fridge/Freezer. The Truma Cooler is available in eight sizes ranging from 30L to 105L and comes in single- and dual-zone models. Truma's portable fridge/freezer is designed for versatile use. There is a portable fridge size for every car, RV, and camper, Overland 4 x 4, backyard kitchen, and every lifestyle. Thanks to its dual-purpose design, the Truma Portable Fridge and Freezer gives campers the power to keep food and drink chilled, ice cold, or frozen – all day.

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www.wayinterglobal.com

PET LIFE VEST

Valterra Products, Mission Hills, Calif., offers the Valterra Pet Life Vests. With reflective strips, rescue handle and leash ring, you can go from hiking to playing in a river with ease. Unexpected currents or a tired dog can change things in moment. The vests are adjustable and have a mesh wraparound for comfort and quick drying. Comes in three sizes that fit dogs from 16 to 70 pounds and a girth from 15" to 35". Now you can take your pups anywhere you adventure.

www.valterra.com



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www.mrheater.com



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Camp Casual, Clarence Center, N.Y., presents its new Microwaveable Dish Sets. Made from recycled polypropylene and all-natural wheat straw. These eight-piece sets are microwave and dishwasher safe. Rigid, tough, highly versatile, BPA-free and FDA approved. Comes in four different colors (Boho Blue, Rustic Red, Mountain Sage and Driftwood). Set includes two 10" large plates, two 7" small plates, two 6" bowls and two 11-ounce tumblers. Great for travel, camping, RVing, parties, picnics, outdoor dining and more.

www.campcasual.com



SCREEN DOOR PROTECTOR

DUO Form, Edwardsburg, Mich., offers the RV Screen Door Protector, providing an easy and affordable option to protect RV screen doors. Easy to use and install, no hardware is needed. Protector can be trimmed to fit with standard scissors making it compatible for all RV screen doors. A strong, custom blended plastic material ensures a pet can't damage or break through an existing entry screen door. Cute paw prints offer an adorable design for all pet lovers and allows safe air flow. 24" by 27". Made in the U.S.A.

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PET BOWL KIT

ObeCo, Elkhart, Ind., offers the Pet Bowl Essentials Kit – “purrrfect” for traveling pets, the company says. Cats, dogs and iguanas can have their water, food dish and leash neatly organized in an RV. Exceptionally durable to handle most day-to-day use. Mount on the back of a closet or cabinet doors, outside storage compartments or inside living areas. Having the Pet Set means one less thing to pack for a trip. The flexible net keeps items tucked tight, so no rattling.

www.organizedobie.com



RV WATER FILTER

Clearsource, Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif., offers the Clearsource Ultra, which uses three-stage filtering and NASA-developed technology to remove or reduce bacteria, cysts and viruses. The 5-micron first-stage filter removes or reduces rust and sediment. The second-stage 0.5-micron coconut shell carbon block filter improves taste and smell while removing chemicals, organic compounds and other contaminants. The third stage VirusGuard filter removes or reduces bacteria like E. coli, cysts like Giardia and viruses.

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Prest-O-Fit Mfg., Chandler, Ariz., offers the Trailhead Universal Step Rug, which fits curved and straight 24" wide steps. The unique bristle-like texture easily brushes away dirt and debris from shoes and paws, helping to preserve an RV's interior. It is made of heavy-duty outdoor turf that is UV-protected and resistant to mold and mildew for all-weather durability. These rugs are simple to install, covering stairs for safe pet entry and exit! Easy to clean, simply hose off and dry.

www.prestofit.com



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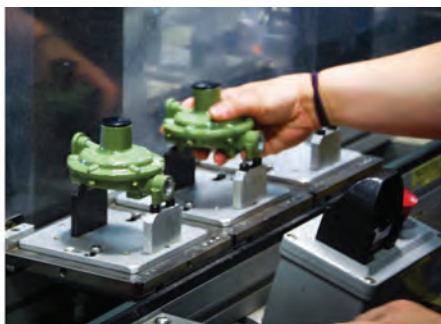


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OUTDOOR CHAIR

Kuma Outdoor Gear, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, presents the Blue Plaid Lazy Bear Chair. This chair has supreme comfort and ample space to kick back and relax. With its full wrapping padded seat back, curl in for a long night around the fire. Durable 600D polyester with a sturdy 3/4" black tube frame, stabilizer feet, and padded back and arm rests. Has an insulated beverage holder and phone pocket. A rolltop large-mouth carry bag is included. The chair is rated for weight capacity of 350 pounds.



www.kumaoutdoorgear.com

FLYING INSECT SCREEN

JR Products, Clarence Center, N.Y., presents the Flying Insect Screens. Wasps, mud daubers, birds and rodents pose a threat to RV furnaces and/or water heaters. These and other pests can enter through vents and openings and cause serious damage that interfere with air flow in and out of a furnace, water heater or battery compartment. Help customers by offering them JR Products' new Flying Insect Screens. These easy-to-install screens will help ensure that their furnace, water heater or battery compartment stays safe from costly invasion by unwanted pests.



www.jrproducts.net



HOLDING TANK DEODORIZER/CLEANER

Century Chemical Corp., Elkhart, Ind., presents the Travel Jon holding tank deodorizers/ cleaners for RV and marine. The company says its Travel Jon line has been keeping campers happy since 1967 by quickly neutralizing odor causing compounds from toilet bowl to tank sensors and leaving a lasting, fresh scent. Along with its liquid formulation, the Travel Jon family includes Blue Max, an effervescent 3-in-1 water soluble toss-in bowl cleaner, and Waste Digester, a powerful blend of enzymes that breaks down waste, paper, grease and tank cake residue while regulating odors.

www.centurychemical.com



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Bethrick, Slinger, Wis., presents GreatPlate Square. GreatPlate Square is suitable for parties, barbecues, picnics, camping or traveling. The sturdy 10" plate, cup and cup holder gives food and drink a secure base indoors or out, on the couch, on the floor, in a car, at the beach, on a boat or even in a pool. It also functions as a serving platter for appetizers, snacks, or desserts. The beverage holder is designed to fit the 20-ounce GreatCups, but also fits cans, bottles, and wine glasses.

www.greatplate.com



STOVETOP OVEN

Omniasweden, Chicago, presents the Omnia stovetop oven. With the Omnia, users can make fresh-baked bread and oven dishes directly on the stovetop. Omnia is easy-to-use, lightweight, compact, and requires no installation.

www.omniasweden.com



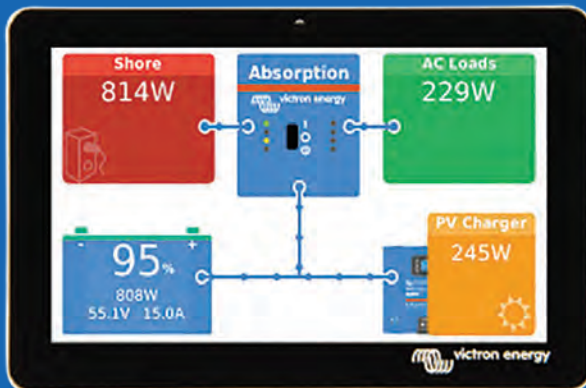
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WI-FI THERMOSTAT

Micro-Air, Allentown, N.J. – the EasyStart and EasyTouch RV people – offers the EasyTouch RV, the only Wi-Fi thermostat. The company says statistics show 65 percent of RVers travel with pets and 50 percent travel with dogs. Pet owners love their animals and the EasyTouch RV. Micro-Air says it's the only aftermarket thermostat that offers alerts and remote-control cabin comfort via 21st Century technology. Features large color touchscreen, every button lit and Wi-Fi/Bluetooth control to boot.

www.microair.net



BIKE RACK

Swagman Racks, Penticton, British Columbia, Canada, offers the Dispatch RV-approved Bike Rack. The Swagman Dispatch is a feature-packed hitch mount bike rack that carries up to two bikes. It features locking hooks to secure your bike and ratcheting wheel straps to aid in retention. It's also RV-approved, which means it's been engineered to withstand the extra force of being used on the back of a trailer, keeping bikes safe and secure.

www.swagman.net



OUTDOOR LOUNGER

GCI Outdoor, Higganum, Conn., presents the Legz Up Lounger, the company's latest chair to showcase Legz Up Technology – a feature that allows users to raise and lower the leg rest without adjusting the backrest angle. A mesh panel in the backrest allows for continual airflow, while the ability to recline the chair to one of four positions adds to the overall comfort of the Legz Up Lounger. Additional features include a head pillow, beverage holder, phone pocket and backpack straps for easy portability.

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Growing Your Finance Department

To make the most of your finance operation, it's important to remember the three P's: People, Process and Products.



By Jan Kelly

Jan Kelly is the president of Kelly Enterprises. She is an educator and consultant, convention speaker and writes frequently for industry publications. For information about educational venues or joining an F&I 20 group, call 800-336-4275 or visit www.JLKelly.com.

Regardless of where your finance department is now, there is always room for improvement and growth. It all comes down to the three P's: People, Process and Products.

People: Your personnel must want to improve – and they must want to be a part of the vision for the future. If they are happy with their current paycheck and do not need more, chances are they will not try new things and they will remain where they are. Is that attitude what is best for your dealership?

As senior management, you can always change the pay plan. However, it is my opinion that all you will succeed in doing is forcing the employee to quit and have bitter feelings about you and the dealership.

Perhaps you can have a job review and explain that growth requires people who wish to improve and expand their opportunities. Take the opportunity to share with the employee what your expectations are of their performance.

Einstein was right – if we do the same things the same way there will be no change in the results. Something has to change, and implementing new ideas and new processes – while being a bit scary – also can be exciting, especially when the team moves forward as one.

Grow your finance personnel by hiring a billing clerk to learn the documentation and computer entry. Get them up to speed so that they can handle a closing, if need be, or a first visit and receipting in the initial payment, if the need arises. As time moves forward, this person should be willing and able to present ancillary products to the customers when the opportunity presents itself.

F&I Training Should be On-Going

Everyone needs encouragement and coaching from time to time. Training is not a one-time event. Education is ongoing and should be considered as such. The market is constantly evolving

and the way you do business needs to change with the market.

In the past, many dealerships seemed to have a business practice that allowed the sales personnel to print the purchase order with all the final sales figures and give that to the customers. The sales representative also collected the check for the initial payment.

What has this practice done to the productivity of the finance department?

Many of the customers leave the dealership without meeting with the finance department representative (also known as the sales business office). That results in the sales department arming the customers with all the information they need to go shopping for funding ... which is what they do from the comfort of their homes using their computer, returning on delivery day with a check made out to the penny – with no ancillary products included.

The finance personnel might receive the deal jacket anytime from the next day to the next week and are told it is a cash deal. The reality is that is it cash from somewhere else – maybe a credit union, maybe a local bank, or maybe the customer sold stocks or bonds or other assets to make this purchase.

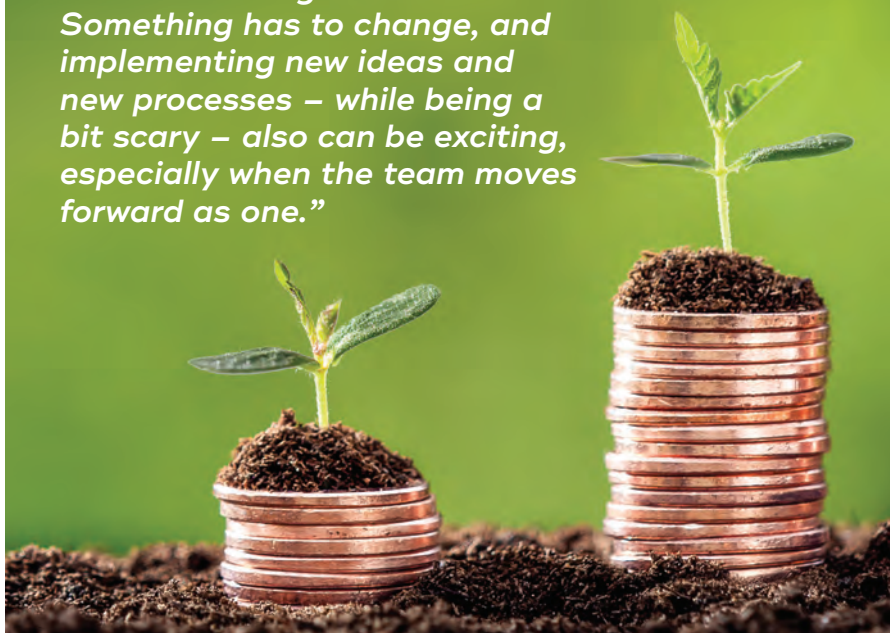
The finance team should be viewed as the cashier for the sales department – and most of the time no customer should leave the dealership without meeting with the finance personnel first.

All purchase orders should be prepared by the finance department. All initial payments should be taken and receipted by the finance department.

This activity ensures 100 percent turnover from sales to the finance department at the point of commitment to purchase. This is essential if the finance department is going to flourish.

The finance team must have every opportunity to share the finance opportunity to each and every sales department customer.

"Einstein was right – if we do the same things the same way there will be no change in the results. Something has to change, and implementing new ideas and new processes – while being a bit scary – also can be exciting, especially when the team moves forward as one."



All About the Second P

Process: Time has shown that the sales price and trade-in figures still need to be approved by the sales manager, in addition to the amount of the initial payment from the customer.

RVs are considered a luxury item and the lenders all like equity at the beginning of the loan. Monetary investment in the purchase is critical for securing financing, providing a payment that is budget-friendly and allowing room in the financing for ancillary products and services.

The sales department should always be asking for at least a 20 percent investment in the purchase from the customer, and more if possible.

The days of zero down and 90 days to first payment must be viewed in our rearview mirrors, as those terms simply cannot be seen through the front windshield. Simply said, they are in our past – not our future.

Meanwhile, many of the deals are currently being closed over the telephone or over the internet. Again, the sales figures must be approved by the sales manager.

When the deal is approved, the sales associate must quickly complete their CRM data entry and get the deal to the finance department *as soon as possible* – hopefully within 10 minutes.

Why is this essential for the deal?

The customer will be shopping for funding within 10 minutes of making a commitment to purchase. Every credit application they complete may lower their credit score.

The best safety for the deal is to get the deal to finance, so that they may contact the customer and arrange to assist them in securing funding for the purchase. By turning the deal to finance, you eliminate another loan officer from reviewing the sales figures.

Have you ever lost a deal or gross profit from an unqualified loan officers telling the customer they paid too much for the unit or that the trade was worth more? Bank branches and credit unions are filled with loan officers who are not specialist in the current RV marketplace. Granted, the current NADA guide is very advantageous to us right now, but it will not always be so.

Like I tell folks, the NADA is a guide – not a Bible. The laws of supply and demand determine the marketplace values. Unless you are in the market every day, you cannot keep up with all the nuances that seem to change daily.

Here are some basic reasons for turning the customer and deal to your in-house finance specialist:



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- 5) Provide an opportunity for the customer to protect their RVing budget
- 6) Provide a one-stop shop = increased convenience for the customer
- 7) Complete all the legal documentation for the sale
- 8) Maintain a proper audit trail for the transaction
- 9) To possibly secure financing for someone with bruised credit. (Not everyone has stellar credit.) Your dealership may have ties to other finance resources that the customer may not have. Give your finance department every opportunity to help you make a sale.
- 10) To maximize every income stream for the dealership



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Proactive Phone Calls Can Help Seal the Deal

Here is an example of how to handle phone calls with customers preparing to finalize terms of a sale, including assisting them with securing financing.

Sales associate: "Congratulations, you have purchased a _____. As you know, there is always some documentation and title work that needs to get completed. The documents will be prepared by our sales business office and will be sent to you via DocuSign.

"Our business manager is currently with a client and will call you shortly to review those documents and help you with arrangements for the initial payment. At what number may she reach you at in about 30 minutes?"

This telephone introduction congratulates the customer for the purchase, welcomes them to your family of customers, and lets them know you have a professional at the dealership who will assist them in funding, in securing the initial payment and in completion of the sales documentation.

The file must get to the finance department ASAP so that the customer contact can be made in a timely fashion.

The Third & Final P

Products: While the RV industry has traditional ancillary benefits and products, there always seems to be something new or improved to present to each and every customer. Those benefits include, but are not limited to, service agreements, tire and rim policies and products, roadside assistance and guaranteed asset protection, in addition to various tracking devices.

Dealerships should require their vendors to provide written proof that their insurance-related policies and products are authorized to do business within the state that the dealership is located in. This should be written authorization from the state department of insurance and it should be renewed annually. The department of insurance oversees service agreements, tire and rim policies, and GAP.

While the vendor's representatives still tow the company line that they are

approved, nothing is wrong with asking for written verification. After all, finance has a duty to protect the dealership and limit the liability to as close to zero as possible.

If your dealership is not selling protective coatings, it definitely should. This is a product that not only protects the sold unit resale value, but it also protects your future used inventory, and allows the customer to spend more time enjoying their coach and less time cleaning. It also provides an income stream for the finance department that is real profit, non-cancellable.

Making money is key, and so is retaining it. Therefore, let's visit the topic of income mix for the finance department. In order to minimize the post-profit from early cancellations, the department's profit must be spread out among the ancillary products.

- Finance reserve should not exceed 30 percent of the total finance revenue
- Insurance products should not exceed more than 35 percent of the finance revenue
- Non-cancellable (i.e., protective coatings and tracking devices) should be at least 35 percent of the finance revenue

A 3 to 5 percent cancellation in finance is what I consider to be normal, because most folks trade in their units at three to four-and-a-half years down the line. This fact alone will generate some cancellations.

When the cancellations exceed 5 percent, it's worth investigating why that is. Is the customer trading the units in? Is the customer selling the unit themselves? Did the customer re-finance? If so, when did they do that?

Finance should contact every customer that pays off their loans early, to say thank you and to inquire about the disposition of the RV.

If the customer sold the unit, the sales business office could be instrumental in transferring the benefits to the next buyer. That would save a cancellation. It would also give the dealership a chance to create a relationship with a new customer.

Your sales business office is essential in building customer retention and in building dealership profitability. *RV*

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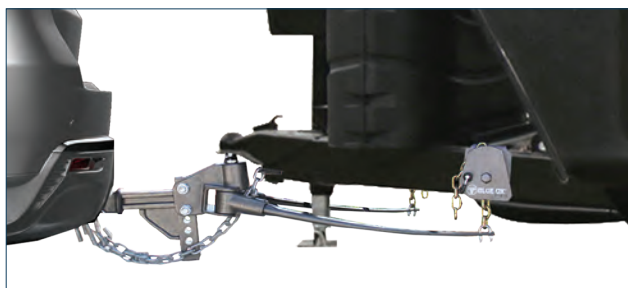


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